

RECOVERING IN CHRIST:  
BUILDING A DURABLE AND ADAPTABLE  
TWELVE-STEP CHRISTIAN RECOVERY MINISTRY  
FOR SMALL GROUPS, CHURCHES, AND OTHER SETTINGS

By

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **RECOVERING IN CHRIST: BUILDING A DURABLE AND ADAPTABLE TWELVE-STEP CHRISTIAN RECOVERY MINISTRY FOR SMALL GROUPS, CHURCHES, AND OTHER SETTINGS**

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This project grew out of my deep belief that the transformative experience of working the Twelve Steps in a program of recovery has much to offer the Christian Church, and my equal conviction that the expression of Christian faith has much to offer people in recovery. Building on the seventy years of history, tradition, and practice of the Twelve Step recovery movement and seven years of experience in the Step By Step Recovery Ministry, I set out to place the Twelve Step experience in its broader context—historical, theological, and biblical—and based on this knowledge, to explore ways that this experience could be shared more broadly. My project documents ways that we have introduced the Twelve Steps to Christian groups and methods we have used to celebrate Christian faith in a Twelve Step recovery context for a wide audience of people within and outside Twelve Step recovery.

The paper begins by presenting the historical context of the Twelve Step recovery movement—from the antecedents of Alcoholic Anonymous and its many influences—up to present with the development of the Step By Step Recovery Ministry and the theologies of both movements. An exploration of the biblical basis for Twelve Step recovery includes an analysis of the “disease model” of addiction in dialogue with Judeo-Christian understandings of Sin.

We then take the experience of the first seven years of Step By Step to another level in a variety of ways and settings. We reached out to a wide cross-section of churches in Manhattan to establish two new sites for the Step By Step ministry, documenting the stages and processes required to bring this to fruition. We opened the windows and doors of Christian recovery to an entire church congregation by offering a “Recovery Sunday” service using liturgical elements developed in Step By Step, integrated into the particular worship style of that congregation. We turned our ongoing Step By Step services into a worship laboratory, experimenting with the liturgy and many other elements of our worship services to find new and different ways to worship God in a recovery context. We reached out to the recovery community with resources specifically designed for an audience that included non-religious and non-Christian people. We sought to learn what current and past Step By Step members liked and did not like about Step By Step worship services and learned about their past and current religious backgrounds and practices. We applied the same questions to a broader national group of people. Finally, we documented the steps necessary to launch various forms of recovery ministry for churches, seminaries, and other organizations in the form of a workbook or manual.

This research and experience is applied to a Christian ministry resource center that uses the model of Twelve Step Christian practice developed in Step By Step to offer a wide array of services. This “Resource Center for Recovery Ministries” will provide a variety of tools to empower people in recovery to start their own Twelve Step recovery ministries.

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For Bob Abel

Loving and patient partner

Unwavering source of support and encouragement

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This project is the result of a very long journey, along which I have had much encouragement and support from many generous and inspiring people. The journey began when I went into recovery in 1990, and I must thank all who stood by me as I put down alcohol and drugs one day at a time and began a spiritual adventure that continues to this day. My long-time sponsor, the late Bob Roche—a pillar of the A.A. community in New York City and beyond—is one of many angels who guided me in my early days and years of recovery, and it was he who encouraged me to return to church after many years away. At the church I joined in 1992, The Riverside Church, my pastors further encouraged me and to each of them I owe a particular and distinctive debt of gratitude: the Rev. Dr. James A. Forbes, Jr., the Rev. Erik Kolbell, the Rev. Sally Norris, the Rev. Elizabeth Wheeler, the Rev. Dr. Brenda Stiers, and the Rev. Linda Tarry-Chard.

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I have no question that my completion of the equivalent of a doctoral dissertation represents nothing less than an absolute miracle, for this recovering alcoholic and addict who couldn’t have conceived of attaining this level of academic achievement when I was still drinking a little more than sixteen years ago. To God goes the glory, all thanks, and all praise! Amen.



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## INTRODUCTION

This project grew out of my deep belief that the transformative experience of the Twelve Step recovery movement—of working the Twelve Steps in a program of recovery—has much to offer the Christian Church, and my equal conviction that the expression of Christian faith has much to offer people in recovery. Building on the seventy years of history, tradition, and practice of the Twelve Step recovery movement and seven years of experience in the Step By Step Recovery Ministry, I set out to place the Twelve Step experience in its broader context—historical, theological, and biblical—and based on this knowledge, to explore ways that this experience could be shared more broadly. My project documents ways that we have introduced the Twelve Steps to Christian groups and methods we have used to celebrate Christian faith in a Twelve Step recovery context for a wide audience of people within and outside Twelve Step recovery.

The paper begins by presenting the historical context of the Twelve Step recovery movement—from the antecedents of Alcoholic Anonymous and its many influences—up to present with the development of the Step By Step Recovery Ministry. I then explore the theologies of both movements. In presenting the biblical basis for Twelve Step recovery, I explore the “disease model” that is at the heart of the Twelve Step movement and hold it in dialogue with Judeo-Christian understandings of Sin.

The purpose of my demonstration project has been to apply this research and experience in a practical way to create something new—a Christian ministry resource center that uses the model of Twelve Step Christian practice developed in Step By Step to offer a wide array of services. This “Resource Center for Recovery Ministries,” which I propose would be housed at New York Theological Seminary, will provide a variety of

tools: tools to empower people in recovery to start their own Twelve Step recovery ministry groups; tools to enable churches to present the Good News of recovery from addictions, compulsions, and unhealthy relationships, attitudes, and behaviors to their congregations; tools for workshops, retreats, small group ministries, and individual spiritual practice. A formal proposal for the Resource Center comprises the Conclusion of this paper.

Building the foundation of the new Resource Center for Recovery Ministries required gathering some additional information, and this has been the work of the demonstration project, in which we took the experience of the first seven years of Step By Step to another level in a variety of ways and settings. We reached out to a wide cross-section of churches in Manhattan to establish two new sites for the Step By Step ministry, documenting the stages and processes required to bring this to fruition. We learned what worked well and what was less effective in launching new sites. We opened the windows and doors of Christian recovery to an entire church congregation by offering a “Recovery Sunday” service using liturgical elements developed in Step By Step, integrated into the particular worship style of that congregation. We turned our ongoing Step By Step services into a worship laboratory, experimenting with the liturgy and many other elements of our worship services to find new and different ways to worship God in a recovery context. We reached out to the recovery community with resources specifically designed for an audience that included non-religious and non-Christian people. We sought to learn what current and past Step By Step members liked and did not like about Step By Step worship services and learned about their past and current religious backgrounds and practices. We applied the same questions to a broader national

group of people, largely in recovery in more than a dozen different recovery fellowships, to learn about their backgrounds and what they thought about Step By Step's mission.

We documented the steps necessary to launch various forms of recovery ministry for churches, seminaries, and other organizations in the form of a workbook or manual, which follows this project manuscript in Appendix A. Additional documentation of the survey instruments and tables of the responses and other supporting materials follow in Appendixes B and C.

What did we learn? That "there is yet more truth and light yet to break forth from God's Holy Word," and that one of the places this light and truth can be found in the incredible, transformative wisdom and experience of Twelve Step recovery.

**PART ONE:**  
**THE HISTORICAL, THEOLOGICAL, SCRIPTURAL, AND SCIENTIFIC**  
**FOUNDATIONS OF THE RECOVERY MOVEMENT AND THE STEP BY STEP**  
**RECOVERY MINISTRY**

Part One explores the historical, theological, scriptural, and scientific foundations of the recovery movement as a basis for understanding and contextualizing Step By Step in Christian faith and practice.

The history of the Twelve-Step recovery movement begins in the first Twelve-Step fellowship, Alcoholics Anonymous, but that movement has roots in the Oxford Group among many other sources. The influences on the co-founders and early principal figures of Alcoholics Anonymous were various and extensive. The Twelve-Step recovery movement was distinguished from its religious forebears through its intentionally “spiritual” and non-religious stance, enabling it to appeal to a wide audience and grow to an international movement with millions of members. Building on, but also distinct from, the history of the Twelve-Step recovery movement, the Step By Step Recovery Ministry came into being in response to a perceived need for a connection between organized Christian practice with Twelve-Step recovery, and has evolved into a growing movement of Twelve Step Christian recovery ministries with a radically inclusive theology.

The theology of Alcoholics Anonymous is that of a spiritual program which grew largely out of a Christian one, the Oxford Group. While remaining officially nonsectarian, nondenominational, and non-religious, A.A.’s theology has roots entwined in Pietism and Wesleyan Methodism. The Step By Step Recovery Ministry seeks to

return to the explicitly Christian nature of Twelve-Step Recovery without returning to the elitist and exclusivist nature of A.A.'s Oxford Group roots, seeking rather to extend branches into modern theologies of liberation. Step By Step's theology is working to build on the most radically inclusive promises inherent in A.A.'s unexpressed subtext of liberation theology and in so doing, to model a new kind of Christian ministry of empowerment and of profound, challenging individual transformation in which all are welcome to participate and all are valued and embraced, a theology of radical inclusion. Ultimately, Step By Step's theology is a theology of grace, for it is only through God's gifts of grace that the miracles and responsibilities of recovery are possible.

The sacred texts of Christian recovery are both the secular texts of recovery and The Bible as it pertains to recovery—how holy scripture views addiction and recovery, in the broader context of sin, healing, and forgiveness. The concept of sin in addiction begins with the prevailing “disease concept” of addiction—popularized by Alcoholics Anonymous and widely accepted by the scientific and medical communities and much of society. The understanding of alcoholism as disease stands in contrast to the historic view of alcoholism as sin, still held by many Christian communions. Both the disease and sin models of addiction have profound ethical and moral implications. Recognizing that justice is at the heart of the Judeo-Christian message, how is recovery viewed from the perspective of justice—what is the church's responsibility to addicts and what responsibilities do people in recovery have to make “justice roll down like waters?”



# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **THE HISTORY OF THE TWELVE STEP RECOVERY MOVEMENT AND THE STEP BY STEP RECOVERY MINISTRY**

### **Introduction**

The history of the Twelve-Step recovery movement begins in the first Twelve-Step fellowship, Alcoholics Anonymous, but that movement has roots in the Oxford Group among many other sources. The influences on the early principal figures of Alcoholics Anonymous were various and extensive, ranging from Lutheranism, Wesleyan Methodist small groups, the Renewal or Holiness Movement, Evangelical Pietism, New Thought, and Swedenborgianism, as well as the influence of William James, among many less direct influences. The Twelve-Step recovery movement was distinguished from its religious forebears through its intentionally “spiritual” and non-religious stance, enabling it to appeal to a wide audience and grow to an international movement with millions of members. Building on, but also distinct from, the history of the Twelve-Step recovery movement, the Step By Step Recovery Ministry came into being in response to a perceived need for a connection between organized Christian practice with Twelve-Step recovery, and in its seven years has evolved from a single small group worship service into a growing movement of Twelve Step Christian recovery ministries with a radically inclusive theology.

## **Alcoholism and Addiction**

Throughout most of recorded human history, the alcoholic—the drunkard—has been a marginal figure, existing on the fringes and doomed to a life of failure, if not madness or death. Given the fact that many foods naturally ferment into alcohol as part of the process of spoilage, it is likely that alcohol has been available and consumed in almost every culture from the dawn of human history. And wherever distilled spirits have been available, there also have been certain people who, once they have started drinking, are unable to stop. Since the mid-twentieth century, such people have generally been known as alcoholics.

## **Earlier Temperance and Sobriety Movements**

Throughout history, there have been attempts to control problem drinking. One particularly successful, if short-lived, sobriety movement took wing in the 1840s. Historian Matthew J. Raphael has written that “nearly all the constitutive elements” of Alcoholics Anonymous “were in place a century before Bill W. set foot in Akron,”<sup>1</sup> and William L. White reports a long history of failed attempts at support groups for people with drinking problems, including the Washington Temperance Society, “fraternal temperance societies, reform clubs, the Ollapud Club, the Keeley Leagues, the United Order of Ex-Boozers, the Jacoby Club of the Emmanuel Clinic, and so on to the [Alcoholic Squad of the] Oxford Group, alcoholics struggling to get sober and stay sober

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew J. Raphael (*pseud.*), *Bill W. and Mr. Wilson: The Legend and Life of A.A.'s Cofounder* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000). 67.

found places to band together for mutual support.”<sup>2</sup> A.A.’s own histories report how the most successful of these movements, the Washington Temperance Society or

Washingtonians:

“flourished, then floundered, essentially for the lack of unifying spiritual principles. In April 1840, six drinking friends got together in Chase’s Tavern in Baltimore and made a decision to stop drinking together. They called themselves the Washingtonians, and the fledgling organization had one aim: ‘the reclamation of drunkards.’ Within a year they had reformed 1,000 drunks and had 5,000 other members and friends; within a few more years, membership had swelled to several hundred thousand. But the Washingtonians did not have a body of tradition to unify its purpose. Its leaders were very much in the public eye, and soon became embroiled in political causes and in the temperance movement. By the end of 1847, the Washingtonians had all but vanished.”<sup>3</sup>

At the movement’s peak, the number of people who signed the Washingtonian “pledge” reached “half a million intemperate drinkers, plus another hundred thousand confirmed drunkards.”<sup>4</sup> But Washingtonianism, as an expression of the revivalism of the Second Great Awakening, “burned itself out” like so many “other evangelical blazes during the nineteenth century.”<sup>5</sup>

In nineteenth and early twentieth century America, the ill-effects of alcohol were widely recognized enough to foster further reactions against alcohol consumption, most notably the Prohibition movement, which culminated in the 1920 passage of the Constitutional amendment that prohibited the sale and consumption of alcoholic beverages in the United States. The Eighteenth Amendment had widespread support, including that of the Rev. S. Parkes Cadman, Congregational minister and then President

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<sup>2</sup> William L. White, *Slaying the Dragon: The History of Addiction Treatment and Recovery in America* (Bloomington, Illinois: Chestnut Health Systems, 1998), 127.

<sup>3</sup> National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence of the San Fernando Valley, Inc. Website, <http://www.ncadd-sfv.org/understa.htm>. Accessed 1/15/02.

<sup>4</sup> Raphael, *Bill W. and Mr. Wilson*, 68.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 69.

of the Federal Council of Churches, who issued a statement decrying the liquor traffic as “evil,” and describing the “social peril of alcoholism” which was “allied with political corruption, crime, gambling, and prostitution.” Cadman believed that alcohol:

“meant the wreckage of men and the degradation of families, which social workers and ministers saw constantly in their daily work. It produced needless inefficiency in industry. Moreover, the tendency in the United States, as has been the case in Europe, was toward an increasing consumption of the stronger liquors with consequent intensifying of social hazards. Methods of control short of prohibition, such as taxation . . . have all proved inadequate to cope with the evil.”<sup>6</sup>

The enforcement of abstinence by teetotalers (the “tee” stood for Total abstinence) was a colossal failure, however, and Prohibition was overturned in the 1930s with the passage of the Twenty-first Amendment. The backlash against Prohibition in the Jazz Age, “Roaring” 1920s made the drinking of alcohol the ultimate act of rebellion, “an act of protest against the victorious Drys, a youthful nose-thumbing at the puritanical elders, the kind of prissy stiff who were stereotypically associated with the Women’s Christian Temperance Union and the Anti-Saloon League.”<sup>7</sup>

## **The Oxford Group**

To understand Step By Step, it is necessary first to understand Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.), and to understand A.A., it is essential to know the history of the group from which it was born, the Oxford Group. Alcoholics Anonymous’ most direct antecedent, and popularly considered its primary source, was a Protestant religious movement founded in 1921 by the Reverend Frank N. D. Buchman, a Lutheran minister born in 1878 and raised in the Pennsylvania Dutch country of Pennsylvania. Among the

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<sup>6</sup> S. Parkes Cadman, Testimony before Committee on the Judiciary of the United States Senate, in K. Austin Kerr, ed., *The Politics of Moral Behavior: Prohibition and Drug Abuse* (Reading: Addison Wesley, 1973).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 54.

influences on Buchman during his formative years were the Schwenkfelders of Perkiomen Seminary, the private school where he received his primary and secondary education. Tom Driberg notes that the “technique of Guidance... is a distinctive doctrine of [Kaspar] Schwenkfeld [von Ossig] [1489-1561] and his followers... the doctrine that God communicated Himself directly to every individual believer.... Sometimes called the doctrine of the Inner Light.”<sup>8</sup> Driberg links the youthful spiritual influences on Buchman even more deeply to spiritual ancestors including the Anabaptists, Waldensians, and Albigensians, each of which were “anti-institutional” and whose “dreams were of a theocracy.” Driberg explains that “this links [to] Buchmanism because one of the Oxford [Group]’s main watchwords was ‘God-control.’”<sup>9</sup> Additional indirect influences that bear consideration within Buchman’s Penn Dutch local ecology—folk with whom he and his family interacted and coexisted—were the Amish, Reformed Mennonites, Brethren in Christ, and various branches of the Dunkers.

Originally, members of Buchman’s Oxford group referred to themselves as the “First-Century Christian Fellowship,” reflecting the influence of such works as Albert Schweitzer’s 1906 *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* and the desire by the group’s members to recapture what they perceived to be authentic Christianity—the intimate, personal, house-church character of the earliest “Christian” communities in the first generations after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.<sup>10</sup> Subsequently the group became known as the Oxford Group (not to be confused with the Oxford Movement) in recognition of the success of the movement at Oxford University, with which, however,

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<sup>8</sup> Tom Driberg, *The Mystery of Moral Re-Armament* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1964), 21.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>10</sup> Raphael, *Bill W. and Mr. Wilson*, 13.

the Group had no official connection. Later, after the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous had split off, and directly before the beginning of World War II, the group took the name it continues to hold today, Moral Re-Armament (MRA). (Moral Re-Armament achieved considerable visibility in the 1960s through its promotion of the internationalist, one-world “Up With People” movement.)

In its Oxford Group stage, during the time A.A. cofounders Bill Wilson and Bob Smith were active members, the Buchmanist movement was moving beyond its roots in the nineteenth-century Christian evangelical movement, described by Driberg as “a combination of pietism and the YMCA movement”<sup>11</sup> (in which Buchman worked for a time), and maturing as a neo-liberal movement with greater affinities to the preaching of such prominent ministers as Harry Emerson Fosdick and Horace Bushnell.<sup>12</sup>

Members of the Oxford Group were encouraged to “align their lives with the Will of God . . . [by] studying the Bible to determine the Universal Will of God, and then listening to God and obeying His Universal Will in order to learn God’s Particular Will” for humanity and through adherence to the “Four Absolutes” of being “absolutely honest, absolutely pure, absolutely unselfish, and absolutely loving.”<sup>13</sup> Combined with the Four Absolutes were the “Five C’s”—confidence, conviction, confession, conversion, and continuance.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Driberg, 21.

<sup>12</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick’s works are among the books reported to have been used most frequently by early Oxford and later A.A. groups, especially *A Great Time to Be Alive*, *As I See Religion*, *The Man from Nazareth*, *The Meaning of Faith*, *The Meaning of Service*, *The Meaning of Prayer*, and *On Being a Real Person*. Cited in Dick B., *Dr. Bob’s Library: Books for Twelve Step Growth* (Kihei, Hawaii: Paradise Research Publications, 1996), pp.11, 17, 19-23, 37, 39-41, 53, 63.

<sup>13</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age: A Brief History of A.A.* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous Publishing, 1957), 67-68.

<sup>14</sup> Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 925.

The Oxford Group drew together people who had “surrendered their lives to god and who [were] endeavoring to lead a spiritual quality of life under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>15</sup> This spirit-driven faith assured its followers that “happily for all of us, God does not wait until we have achieved things before speaking to us and giving us the opportunity and the strength to work for Him and with Him in the performance of His purpose for the world. The guidance of the Spirit of God is an ancient experience, long known not only to prophets and seers but to ordinary men and women and children in Old Testament times, and then, with tenfold clarity, after Pentecost.”<sup>16</sup> The stream of Christian Perfectionism described above in the theology of the Oxford Group would later prove to be a major point of contention for its most famous offspring, Alcoholics Anonymous.

### **Influence of Methodism and the Holiness Movement**

Methodism also has been cited as a source of Oxford Group as well as A.A. theology, particularly in the Methodist emphasis on “experiential religion rather than creed and doctrine . . . [and] on conversion, holiness, assurance, Christian perfection, and God’s enduring parental love for all creatures . . . an ethos of love, acceptance, and personal growth and maturity.”<sup>17</sup> One Methodist source was *The Upper Room: Daily Devotions for Family and Individual Use*, published by the Department of Home Missions, Evangelism, Hospitals of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, which was required reading for many Oxford Group members as part of their daily “Quiet Time.”<sup>18</sup> The Upper Room continued to be used by early A.A. groups in the years before A.A.

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<sup>15</sup> Raphael, *Bill W. and Mr. Wilson*, 72.

<sup>16</sup> J.Thornton-Duesbery, *The Open Secret of MRA* (London, Blandford Press, 1964), 29.

<sup>17</sup> Lewis V. Baldwin, “Early African American Methodism,” *Heritage and Hope*, p26-27.

<sup>18</sup> *Dr. Bob and the Good Old-Timers* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1980), 139, and Dick B., *Dr. Bob’s Library: Books for Twelve Step Growth* (Kihei, Hawaii: Paradise Research Publications, 1996), 7-8.

literature, like the books *Alcoholics Anonymous* and *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, was written and replaced other religious and inspirational texts as primary readings for members of the fellowship.

John Wesley, Methodism's founder, conceived of the denomination as a means of fellowship. He believed that church members could "help each other work out their salvation . . . . In fellowship, strength would be gained, and the feeble and lonely would be sheltered and cheered."<sup>19</sup> Modern Methodists describe their church as "a company of men [sic] having the form and seeking the power of godliness, united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love."<sup>20</sup> Williams notes that "Wesley was heir to the Pietist-Baptist-Quaker teaching that religion is primarily an experience, an emotion, an attitude rather than primarily a theology. Present-day Methodism continues to be deeply concerned that the presence of Jesus be felt warmly in every Christian heart and that his teachings be taken seriously."<sup>21</sup>

### ***Perfectionism***

Leo Hirrel explains that "the Wesleyan tradition of perfection (or entire sanctification, or holiness) rested upon the belief that God might grant a second blessing to members of His Church." He cites John H. Wigger's observation that in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century in America, "Wesley's ideas of entire sanctification received a diminished emphasis.... [But] during the 1830s, however, the holiness movement

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<sup>19</sup> John Wesley, cited in Clarence E. Walker, *A Rock in a Weary Land: The African Methodist Episcopal Church During the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 6

<sup>20</sup> *Doctrines and Disciplines of the Methodist Church, 1948* (Methodist Publishing House, 1948), 32, cited in Williams, *What Americans Believe and How They Worship*, 291.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 292.



gained new importance, led by the remarkably energetic lay woman, Phoebe Palmer.”<sup>22</sup> Described as one who “could have graced a throne, or filled the office of a bishop, or organized and governed a new sect....Whoever promotes holiness in all this country, must build upon the deep-laid foundations of this holy woman.”<sup>23</sup> “The quiet discourse and boundless activity” of Mrs. Palmer “became the major impetus in setting off a world wide [holiness] movement.”<sup>24</sup> “For the remainder of the nineteenth century, the holiness movements attracted an important, but not unanimous following among the various Methodist denominations.”<sup>25</sup>

Edwin S. Gaustad describes how the holiness movement stressed the process that goes on after sanctification.... Beyond justification lay sanctification, and beyond the new birth lay a life-long process of maturing, of growing in God’s grace.”<sup>26</sup> It is this stream of influence that is likely to have been felt by Frank Buchman and the Oxford Group.

On the subject of Perfection, Wesley had the following insights:

“There is such a thing as perfection; for it is again and again mentioned in Scripture. It is not so early as justification; for justified persons are to ‘go on unto perfection.’ (Heb. 6:1.) It is not so late as death; for St. Paul speaks of living men that were perfect. (Phil. 3:15.) It is not absolute. Absolute perfection belongs not to man, nor to angels, but to God alone. It does not make a man infallible: None is infallible, while he remains in the body. Is it sinless? It is not worth while to contend for a term. It is ‘salvation from sin.’ It is ‘perfect love.’ (1 John 4:18.) This is the essence of it; its properties, or inseparable fruits, are, rejoicing evermore, praying without ceasing, and in everything giving thanks.

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<sup>22</sup> Leo Hirrel, “Assessing the Influence of Religious Ideas Charles Finney's Perfectionism,” <http://members.aol.com/leohirrel/finney/index.html#note25> Accessed 1/27/07.

<sup>23</sup> Attributed to a “leading minister” upon the death of Phoebe Palmer in 1874. “The Holiness Movement,” *The Bible Wheel—History—19<sup>th</sup> Century—Spoke 19—Psalms, Mark, John.* [http://www.biblewheel.com/History/C19\\_Holiness.asp](http://www.biblewheel.com/History/C19_Holiness.asp). Accessed 1/8/07.

<sup>24</sup> Idem, citing M. E. Dieter, *The Holiness Revival of the Nineteenth Century*.

<sup>25</sup> Hirrel, “Assessing the Influence of Religious Ideas.”

<sup>26</sup> Edwin S. Gaustad, “Holiness and Pentecostalism,” *A Documentary History of Religion in America Since 1865*, ed. Edwin S. Gaustad (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1983), 298.

(1 Thess. 5:16, &c.) It is improvable. It is so far from lying in an indivisible point, from being incapable of increase, that one perfected in love may grow in grace far swifter than he did before. It is amissible, capable of being lost; of which we have numerous instances. But we were not thoroughly convinced of this, till five or six years ago. It is constantly both preceded and followed by a gradual work. But is it in itself instantaneous or not? In examining this, let us go on step by step. An instantaneous change has been wrought in some believers: None can deny this.... By perfection I mean the humble, gentle, patient love of God, and our neighbour, ruling our tempers, words, and actions. I do not include an impossibility of falling from it, either in part or in whole.... And I do not contend for the term sinless, though I do not object against it. As to the manner. I believe this perfection is always wrought in the soul by a simple act of faith; consequently, in an instant. But I believe a gradual work, both preceding and following that instant.”<sup>27</sup>

Although Wesley’s own description of the concept of perfectionism clearly does not elevate humanity to the Divine and seems rather to describe an ongoing, usually “gradual” process of sanctification, it is worth noting that Bill Wilson believed the very concept of perfection to be a stumbling block to recovery for alcoholics and discarded it. In the A.A. Promises, the opposite is lifted up in the statement, “we claim spiritual progress rather than spiritual perfection.”<sup>28</sup> However, Wesley’s description of perfection coming “in an instant” bears an intriguing similarity to Wilson’s description of his own “spiritual awakening” experience, which became a cornerstone of the A.A. recovery process, later codified into Step Twelve’s description of “having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these Steps...”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> John Wesley, “A Plain Account of Christian Perfection as believed and taught by the Reverend Mr. John Wesley, from the year 1725, to the year 1777,” *The Works of John Wesley* (1872 ed. by Thomas Jackson), vol. 11, p366-446, on United Methodist Church Global Board of General Ministries website, United Methodist History, Wesley, Perfectionism, <http://gbgm-umc.org/UMhistory/Wesley/perfect8.html>. Accessed 1/27/07.

<sup>28</sup> “The Promises,” *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p68-69.

<sup>29</sup> Bill Wilson’s testimony of his spiritual awakening is found in “Spiritual Experiences,” *The A.A. Grapevine, Inc.*, July 1962. Step Twelve, “How It Works,” *Alcoholics Anonymous*, and *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*.

Writing from a different perspective, Richard Allen, founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, wrote that Methodism's "plain and simple Gospel suits best for any people, for the unlearned can understand, and the learned are sure to understand; and the reason that the Methodists are so successful in. . . awakening and conversion . . . is the plain doctrine and having a good discipline."<sup>30</sup>

Another Methodist contribution to the Oxford Group (and today, to Step By Step) was the Methodist model small group ministry. Steven W. Manskar describes how

"John Wesley developed such a discipleship system... of societies, classes, bands, and select societies.... While remaining loyal to the Church, he went beyond its walls to reach the people who rarely attended services or participated in any aspect of its life. He went to the people whose lives were most directly affected by the changing economic and cultural reality of the time. The industrial revolution was transforming Britain from an agrarian to an industrial society. Increasing numbers of people were moving from the land to the town and city to work in factories, mills, and mines. Many left behind family and friends in their search for work and means to support themselves and their families. For many of these folk who lived hard lives in grinding poverty, the Methodist societies and class meetings became their support network and spiritual home.... [bringing] the good news of Christ and universal grace to the people neglected by the established Church."<sup>31</sup>

Nathan O. Hatch describes Methodism's appeal in its "breathtaking message of individual freedom, autonomy, responsibility, and achievement," noting that "more African Americans became Christians in ten years of Methodist preaching than in a century of Anglican influence." Initially, at least, "Methodism did not suppress the impulses of popular religion, dreams and visions, ecstasy, unrestrained emotional release,

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<sup>30</sup> Allen, Richard, *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1980—reprint edition), 29.

<sup>31</sup> Steven W. Manskar, "Small Groups & Accountability: The Wesleyan Way of Christian Formation," *The General Board of Discipleship*, <http://oxford-institute.org/site/2002papers/2002-8Manskar.pdf>. Accessed 1/7/07.

preaching by blacks, by women, by anyone who felt the call.”<sup>32</sup> Although the Oxford Group remained almost exclusively (and intentionally) a white, European-American and English upper-middle-class movement, the accessible, popular qualities it shared with the tenets of Methodism described above would bear fruit in the wide and broad-based acceptance among people of a variety of backgrounds that the Oxford Group’s more famous and successful offspring, A.A., was to achieve over time, and, most recently, with Step By Step.

### **The Rev. Sam Shoemaker’s Influence**

Bridging the Oxford Group movement and influential in the birth of A.A. was The Reverend Canon Samuel Moor Shoemaker, Jr. Rector of Calvary Episcopal Church in New York City from 1925 to 1951 and an evangelical Episcopalian. Sam Shoemaker, as he was known, was a leader in the Oxford Group in North America as well as the leader of one of the Oxford Group meetings that included Edwin “Ebby” Thacher, who was to become Bill Wilson’s “sponsor” (before such a term or role had been formalized) in the early years of A.A. Shoemaker proclaimed to his group that “every so often in human history, the Spirit of God comes into the world in fresh manifestation of power. We notice a kind of cycle in the spiritual life of mankind: somewhere great Reality is born, which brings a new discovery of God and new tides of life.”<sup>33</sup> This statement is evocative of the prophetic statement that Pastor John Robinson made in sending the departing Pilgrims (later to become the American Congregationalists) forth from Leyden, the Netherlands in 1620 as they left to seek freedom and a new life in the New World:

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<sup>32</sup> Nathan O. Hatch, “The Puzzle of American Methodism,” *American Church History: A Reader*, ed. Henry Warner Bowden and P.C. Kemeny (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 284.

<sup>33</sup> Samuel M. Shoemaker, Jr., *National Awakening* (New York: Harper, 1936), 23.

“the Lord hath more truth and light yet to break forth from His holy word.”<sup>34</sup> Somewhat radically for an Episcopal father, Shoemaker was recognizing a “new light” theology, a theology of God’s continuing revelation, and seeing it expressed in the birth of the Twelve Step recovery movement.

In a speech in December 10, 1928, Shoemaker described how the Oxford movement had “rekindled hopes, strengthened wills and altogether remade personalities,” and listed six crucial aspects of Oxford members’ spiritual practice:

“First, the importance of the individual in religious work . . . . This movement believes the individual intensely matters; that more is likely to happen between two people guidedly talking together than as a result of the average sermon, provided one of those people has had a genuine experience. Second, the belief that sin is the key to human problems . . . . Therefore you will find this fellowship tackling personal sin in all of its forms with that confidence which belongs to all those who have found Christ the Cure. Third, the adequacy of Jesus Christ to solve our personal needs . . . . Conversion seems very remote to most people. Surrender is a handle by which to take hold of it. By talking out fully a person’s sins with them, negative or positive, by sharing your own when it will help, you can pack the idea of surrender full of meaning . . . . Surrender is our part in conversion; and God will do His part in His time if we fulfill ours. . . . Fourth, guidance as the continuing relationship with our Lord. . . . Divine guidance is perhaps the most important rediscovery of the movement. Fifth, the possibility and necessity for every Christian to be a personal witness for Christ. . . . Sixth, the rediscovery of Christian fellowship upon a deep level.”<sup>35</sup>

### **A.A. Breaks with the Oxford Group**

The new “great reality” described by Shoemaker broke through for the cofounders of A.A. and their earliest followers, who split from the Oxford Group (where they had been operating as the “Alcoholic Squad”) in the late 1930s, the break coming in 1937 for

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<sup>34</sup> Robert Merrill Bartlett, “Our Pilgrim Heritage,” Sail 1620 website, The Society of Mayflower Descendants in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, [http://www.sail1620.org/discover\\_feature\\_our\\_pilgrim\\_heritage.shtml](http://www.sail1620.org/discover_feature_our_pilgrim_heritage.shtml). Accessed 1/27/07.

<sup>35</sup> “A First-Century Christian Fellowship,” pamphlet based on speech to The Club, New York, New York, December 10, 1928, Cited in Dick B., *Sam Shoemaker: ‘Co-founder’ of A.A.*, unpublished manuscript, 2002.

the New York branch of what was to become A.A. and 1939 for the Ohio branch. (Rev. Shoemaker made his own formal break with the rechristened Moral Re-Armament in 1941.)<sup>36</sup> Ernest Kurtz notes that “Wilson stated often, strongly, and colorfully, [that] the contributions of the Oxford Group to Alcoholics Anonymous were twofold: positive and negative. Among the positive contributions, direct and indirect, were those having to do primarily with ‘tone’ and ‘style,’ and those finding expression in specific practices.”<sup>37</sup> Linda Mercadante explains the reasons for the break in this way: “in splitting, Alcoholics Anonymous departed from a certain broad, optimistic, and global vision of regeneration and mission.”

A.A. proceeded from the point of its break with the Oxford Group to develop the essential core of today’s program of recovery. There were various reasons for the split, but it seems that differences in focus led to divergences in theology. One difference was the difficulty for recovering alcoholics of aspiring to Oxford’s “Four Absolutes.” In a 1940 letter, Bill Wilson explained that while “the ideals of purity, honesty, unselfishness, and love are as adhered to by members of Alcoholics Anonymous as by any other group of people. . . we found that when you put the word ‘absolute’ before them, alcoholics just couldn’t stand the pace, and too many went out and got drunk again. . . As you well understand, we drunks are all-or-nothing people. . . . we saw people going broke on this sort of perfection—trying to get too good by Thursday.”<sup>38</sup> Mercandante affirms this understanding, noting that

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<sup>36</sup> Dick B., *The Oxford Group and Alcoholics Anonymous*, 147-148.

<sup>37</sup> Ernest Kurtz, *Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous* (Center City, MN: Hazleden, 1979), 48.

<sup>38</sup> William Wilson, 1940 letter, quoted in Kurtz, *Spirituality of Imperfection*, 47-48.

“the high expectation for the postconversion behavior—rather than the low view of the initial human condition—was what early A.A. members left behind.... There is a very frank recognition in early A.A. writings of the fallibility, imperfection, and powerlessness of human abilities in the face of alcohol.... The Oxford Group, on the contrary, expected that after conviction, conversion, and submission was... so great, in fact, that they could speak of attaining the four absolutes.... It was a mind-set that expected miracles and exemplary behavior. The addiction-recovery phenomenon takes a more pessimistic view of human nature.”<sup>39</sup>

Another serious point of disagreement stemmed from the emphasis by nonalcoholic members of the Oxford Group on evangelizing new members and achieving conversions among the reputable members of the white upper-middle class in America and England. This focus was described in 1934 by Union Theological Seminary president Henry Pitney van Dusen, who published two influential articles in *The Atlantic Monthly* about Frank Buchman and the Oxford movement. In them, he described Buchman’s beliefs and the reason for his approach:

“Nothing, [Buchman] said, but religious revival of a most drastic and sweeping kind could possibly save the world from impending catastrophe. . . [and] the key to revival lay in work with individuals one by one within intimate fellowships. . . . small bands of completely committed, disciplined, carefully trained men and women of different nations moving continuously across the face of the world, touching with new life individuals here and there, binding them into close-knit fellowships, and then bearing the contagion from group to group. It must be work directed primarily to wealth and position and privilege, to the ‘up-and-outs’; these, he felt, the churches were neglecting to reach with a message of radical transformation. The movement would begin in the universities; Oxford would kindle Yale; Princeton and Harvard men would be used to revive religion at Cambridge and Cape Town.”<sup>40</sup>

Buchman understood his movement as intentionally exclusivist and elitist, in effect a “trickle-down” theology of spiritual enlightenment, to borrow the terminology of failed Reagan-era economics. From society’s movers and shakers would come the

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<sup>39</sup> Linda Mercadante, *Victims and Sinners: Spiritual Roots of Addiction and Recovery* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 78-79.

<sup>40</sup> Henry Pitney van Dusen, “Apostle to the Twentieth Century: Frank N. D. Buchman: Founder of the Oxford Group Movement,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 154, No. 1, July 1934, 1-2.

impetus for spiritual transformation of the entire world. Van Dusen further clarifies the Oxford Group's theology, whose "presuppositions and practices . . . [were] colored if not determined by [Buchman's] personal faith" as rooted in the conservative Lutheran pietism of Buchman's Pennsylvania home and of the institution at which he received his theological training, Mount Airy Seminary. Characteristics of this brand of Protestant belief and practice were "its otherworldliness, its loyal acceptance of existing political and social authority, its pessimistic estimate of human nature, its stress on 'sin' and 'faith' and 'rebirth' and 'regeneration,' its uncritical use of the Bible, its intense mysticism, even its practice of Divine Guidance."<sup>41</sup>

The moment at which van Dusen wrote his critique was the height of the Great Depression and on the eve of the Second World War, after Hitler had already risen to power in Germany. From this perspective, van Dusen saw the Oxford Group standing "in conscious and deliberate reaction from the dominant mood of the passing era—the arid intellectualism, the cheap sophistication, the withering and throttling self-centeredness and self-consciousness, the future lust for self-expression and self-realization, which have cursed the modern temper. . . . In this reaction, the Oxford Group Movement [was] but one current in a vast wave . . . overwhelming the 'modern mood'. . . psychiatry. . . Fascism, Communism. . . the Nazi movement. . . and various 'youth movements' of different kinds. . . represent[ing] a reaction against the individualism and self-sufficiency which was the ideal of Europe that fell into ruins in 1914."<sup>42</sup>

The Oxford Group's targeted population among society's educated and elite contrasted sharply with the focus on the life-and-death struggle with addiction that

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>42</sup> Van Dusen, Henry Pitney, "The Oxford Group Movement:: An Appraisal," *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 154, No. 2, August 1934, 247.



(understandably) preoccupied the early members of A.A. The popular characterization of the Oxford Group as “Religion in a tuxedo” that “ministers chiefly to the ‘up-and-outers’” (as opposed to the “down-and-outers” reached by a group like the Salvation Army)<sup>43</sup> stood in stark contrast to the realities facing the members of the Oxford Group’s “alcoholic squad.” These early followers developed “a view of alcoholism that had not come to them from the Oxford Group. This was the understanding of alcoholism as an illness of mind and body. . . . To them, alcoholism was not just another human failing or sin; it was a soul-destroying malady.”<sup>44</sup> A.A. applied the lessons it learned from Oxford Groups in Akron, Ohio and New York City, particularly “the power of nonprofessional, religiously-oriented groups where people help one another with common problems. A.A. also learned what not to do in trying to help alcoholics. The aggressive evangelism and focusing on public figures that [had come] to characterize Oxford groups had to be eliminated from any program that would be effective with alcoholics. [These] modifications and changes were made on a trail and error basis by the early members of what came to be called A.A.”<sup>45</sup>

### **Formative Influences on Bill Wilson, A.A.’s Co-founder**

Moving beyond the influence of the Oxford Group and its founder on A.A., we move to the co-founder of A.A., Bill Wilson and the various influences in his spiritual

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<sup>43</sup> J. Paul Williams, “Oxford Group (Moral Re-Armament),” *What Americans Believe and How They Worship*, Third Edition (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 443.

<sup>44</sup> *Pass It On: The Story of Bill Wilson and How the AA Message Reached the World* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1984), 154.

<sup>45</sup> Howard Clinebell, “Alcoholics Anonymous: Still Our Greatest Resource,” *Understanding and Counseling Persons with Alcohol, Drug, and Behavioral Addictions*, Revised and Enlarged Edition. (Nashville; Abingdon Press, 1998), 203.

formation. Born in East Dorset, Vermont in 1895, Wilson attended East Dorset Congregational Church as a boy but turned away from the church and Christianity at age eleven after attending a temperance conference at the church and, being asked to sign a temperance pledge, as Susan Cheever describes, “he could feel a stubbornness taking control of his feelings. Who did they think they were to tell him how to live for the rest of his life? Whose rules were these, anyway? He wasn’t going to drink, but he wasn’t going to sign their pledge either.” His father was a drunk; his parents had divorced in 1905; he and his sister were left to be raised by their grandparents; and he was “still reeling from...the explosion of his beloved family, and the dislocation of his life.”

Cheever reports that Wilson “walked away from Sunday school and away from church. He decided that he was an atheist. If there was a God, how could he have allowed this to happen? If he was to have a decent life, he knew he would have to build it for himself, in spite of God, with his own intelligence and determination.”<sup>46</sup> By his teens, Wilson was drinking, and on the path that would lead him to hit his own bottom in alcoholism much later—and then to his redemption in recovery. The early religious influences on Wilson, therefore, must be characterized as subliminal—the scriptures, liturgies, sermons, and hymns of an early twentieth century New England Congregational upbringing into which intruded incredibly harsh realities that for which the messages of his religious upbringing had no answer, at least not for Bill Wilson. Ernest Kurtz, nothing that little is known of Wilson’s early religious experience, believes that the strongest religious influence on the young Bill was his grandfather Fayette, an “Ingersoll-

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<sup>46</sup> Susan Cheever, *My Name Is Bill: Bill Wilson—His Life and the Creation of Alcoholics Anonymous* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2004), 44-45.

inclined transcendentalist,” and that “in response to his ideas... the young Bill Wilson had ‘left the church.’”<sup>47</sup>

### **Swedenborgian Influence on Bill Wilson and Alcoholics Anonymous**

One sometimes-suggested influence on Bill Wilson’s personal theology (and therefore A.A.’s) is Swedenborgianism and the Swedenborgian New Church or New Jerusalem Church. Followers of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), a Swedish scientist and theologian, believe that “God has revealed Himself in many ways—the universe itself, human life, and the coming of Christ are all revelations of God, as is the Bible, its pages divulging the most complete insights to truth known to the human experience.”<sup>48</sup> Other tenets of Swedenborgianism include the belief “that religion touches all areas of our lives. Our responsibility is to put what we believe into practice in our daily lives. All who do this, of whatever faith, are saved since they are living in the spirit of Christ’s name.”<sup>49</sup> The following statement by Swedenborg, if there was evidence that it was ever known to Bill Wilson, would be a ringing affirmation of Swedenborgian influence (*italics added*):

“Wisdom [is] magnificent and finely decorated palace. One climbs up to enter this palace by *twelve steps*. One can only arrive at the first step by means of the Lord’s power through joining with Him...As a person climbs these steps, he perceives that no one is wise from himself but from the Lord...*The twelve steps* into the palace of wisdom signify love in union with faith and faith in union with love.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Ernest Kurtz, *Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous* (Center City, MN: Hazelden, 1991), 16.

<sup>48</sup> <http://www.swedenborg.org/tenets.cfm>. Accessed 1/4/07.

<sup>49</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>50</sup> Emanuel Swedenborg cited in Barry C. Halterman, “Swedenborg and Alcoholics Anonymous,” [http://www.swedenborg.ca/swedenborg/swedenborgs\\_influence/bill\\_wilson.htm](http://www.swedenborg.ca/swedenborg/swedenborgs_influence/bill_wilson.htm). Accessed 1/4/07.

Elsewhere, Swedenborg describes an experience that resonates with the white light “spiritual awakening” that Bill Wilson describes movingly and which is a cornerstone of the Twelve Steps.<sup>51</sup> Swedenborg wrote:

“It seemed as if a continual blaze of new and recreating light had been poured forth on my delighted understanding, opening it to the contemplation of the sublimest mysteries of wisdom, in a manner and degree, and with a force of satisfactory evidence, which I had never known before.”<sup>52</sup>

The most obvious avenue for Swedenborgian influence comes through Bill’s wife, Lois Burnham Wilson, who grew up in a Swedenborgian New Church home. The granddaughter of the Rev. N.C. Burnham, a Swedenborgian scholar and one of the founders of the Swedenborgian Academy of the New Church in Pennsylvania, Lois’ family is reported to have been “very active” in the Swedenborgian church. In 1918 Bill and Lois were married in the Swedenborgian church in Brooklyn, New York.<sup>53</sup> Lois is reported to have replied drily to a question about whether she followed this belief system that she “was raised as a Swedenborgian.”<sup>54</sup> Hugh Wyatt believes that Swedenborgianism and A.A. do indeed share “profoundly compatible” principles, including “A.A.’s minimalist requirement of a power greater than oneself, or God as we understood him and the need to amend one’s own life by turning to that power.”<sup>55</sup> Barry Halterman also affirms that while “Bill Wilson did not sit down with Swedenborg’s

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<sup>51</sup> “Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps...” from Step Twelve, in “How It Works,” *Alcoholics Anonymous*, and *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*.

<sup>52</sup> Emanuel Swedenborg, quoted in George Trobridge, *Swedenborg, Life and Teachings* (New York: Swedenborg Foundation, 1969), 219.

<sup>53</sup> Idem.

<sup>54</sup> Hugh D. Hyatt, “Swedenborg’s Influence,” <http://hugh.freeshell.org/Swedenborg/influence.html>. Accessed 1/4/07.

<sup>55</sup> Idem.

writings and produce his Twelve Steps directly from them.... just as clear is the complete harmony between Swedenborg's teachings on spiritual growth and development and the fundamental principles of the Twelve Steps. AA's Twelve Steps make a wonderful outline of Swedenborg's teachings on the process of repentance, reformation and regeneration."<sup>56</sup>

However, the strongest Swedenborgian influence on Bill Wilson may not have been his wife nor his own reading (if any) of Swedenborgian theology, but rather William James (1847-1910), whose book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, is one of the primary influences cited by Bill Wilson himself and several of his biographers and A.A. historians. Ernest Kurtz notes that reading James

"profoundly affected Wilson. In fact, the American philosopher-psychologist was the only author cited in Alcoholics Anonymous....Wilson also seemed to attribute the phrase 'deflation at depth' to William James.... Therefore, on the question of William James as—in Wilson's own words—'a founder of Alcoholics Anonymous'... Bill Wilson linked James' portrayal of 'conversion' with what he had learned... of the necessity and role of hopelessness."<sup>57</sup>

Gustav Niebuhr notes that it was William James' Swedenborgian father, Henry James, Sr., "from whom he inherited his lifelong interest in religion."<sup>58</sup> Henry James, Sr. wrote admiringly how Swedenborg "grasped with clear and intellectual vision the seminal principles of things"<sup>59</sup> and Swedenborg's "extreme sobriety of mind... which

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<sup>56</sup> Halterman, "Swedenborg and Alcoholics Anonymous."

<sup>57</sup> Kurtz, *Not-God*, 23.

<sup>58</sup> Gustav Niebuhr, 1997, cited by Sonia Soneson Werner, "William James' Influence on Psychology and Spiritual Healing," [http://www.swedenborg.ca/swedenborg/swedenborgs\\_influence/william\\_james.htm](http://www.swedenborg.ca/swedenborg/swedenborgs_influence/william_james.htm). Accessed 1/4/07.

<sup>59</sup> Henry James, Sr., quoted in Trobridge, 289.

ends by making us feel at last his very words to be almost insipid with veracity.... Such sincere books it seems to me were never before written.”<sup>60</sup>

Ralph Barton Perry observes that while Swedenborg “did not convert” the young William James, he “rather confirmed and sustained him, giving him a language, a systematic framework, and an organized support for the faith that was in him.”<sup>61</sup> James’ interest in Swedenborg led him to write in 1869 *The Secret of Swedenborg, being an elucidation of his doctrine of the Divine Natural Humanity*. This book attacks Swedenborg as the “sect of the New Jerusalem” that

“deliberately empties itself of all interest in the hallowed struggle which society is everywhere making for her very existence against established injustice and sanctified imposture, in order to concentrate its energy and prudence upon the washing and dressing, upon the larding and stuffing, upon the embalming and perfuming, or its own invincibly squalid little corpus. The Phaisaic spirit, the spirit of separatism or sect, is the identical spirit of hell.”<sup>62</sup>

Despite the negativity of James’ characterization of Swedenborgianism, his father’s involvement and his own active engagement with the subject matter indicate a Swedenborgian influence, whether positive or negative. James’ *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is considered a seminal influence on Bill Wilson after he got sober, providing the language he needed to understand his own white light experience.

Sonia Werner proposes that through James’ influence on Alcoholics Anonymous, Swedenborgian ideas continue to live, that “just as the birth of Jesus Christ occurred in a humble stable rather than in a grand palace, perhaps New Church ideas are being born in

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<sup>60</sup> Henry James, Sr., *Substance and Shadow*, 103, quoted in Trobridge, 285.

<sup>61</sup> Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*, Vol. 1, *Inheritance and Vocation* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1936), 20.

<sup>62</sup> James cited by Perry, *Thought and Character*, 26.

people's hearts while they are in a small, simple, rented room for a Twelve-Step meeting.”<sup>63</sup> This may be more of a projection than a fact, however.

### **The Founding of Alcoholics Anonymous**

Alcoholics Anonymous was founded in Akron, Ohio, in 1935 by two alcoholics, William Griffith (Bill) Wilson, a failed Wall Street trader and businessman, and Robert Holbrook (Dr. Bob) Smith, a medical doctor, who experienced the revelation that, by sharing with each other their feelings about their personal struggles with—and defeat by—alcoholism, they could achieve something they had been unable to do through any other means: stop drinking and remain sober. (See Chapter Two for a further exploration of one of the founding myths of A.A., the story of “The Man in the Bed.”) The spiritual connection of these two individuals and the transforming power of the Spirit of God that moved between them gave birth to a movement, A.A., which currently counts nearly 2.2 million recovering alcoholics in over 100,000 groups among its members in the United States and around the world.<sup>64</sup> There are probably a hundred related twelve-step recovery movements based on the principles and Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, bringing the total number of people in some form of organized recovery program to as many as 15 million in some 500,000 individual groups.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Werner, “William James’ Influence.”

<sup>64</sup> Statistics provided by General Service Office of Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, New York, New York, December 2006.

<sup>65</sup> For example, the second-largest Twelve-Step fellowship, Narcotics Anonymous (N.A.), counts over 28,000 groups on its rolls. With a general average of 20 members per group, N.A. has approximately 560,000 members. Statistics from Narcotics Anonymous World Services, Van Nuys, California, Copyright 1999. Another fellowship with significant numbers of members, Overeaters Anonymous, lists 7,500 groups or approximately 150,000 members. Statistics from Overeaters Anonymous World Service Office, Copyright 2001. Hemfelt and Fowler report that 15 million people are members of 500,000 recovery groups. Robert Hemfelt and Richard Fowler, *Serenity: A Companion for Twelve Step Recovery* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 21.

At any hour of the day, somewhere in the world, two or more people will gather together to receive the grace of God in the form of their continued, daily recovery from the devastating effects of alcoholism or other life-threatening forms of addiction. For the Twelve Step Recovery movement, whose central principles and traditions are best and most purely exemplified by its founding group, Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.), the spiritual connection of afflicted people with each other and with God is at the heart of a great miracle that has transformed millions of lives.

While the format and some of the content of A.A. meetings varies considerably from group to group, all groups share a few essential characteristics: people gather out of a shared “desire to stop drinking,” although not all members have necessarily achieved success in managing to abstain from drinking. A.A.’s small groups are peer-oriented, with volunteer leaders who are considered “trusted servants.”

Viewing alcoholism from the vantage point of the early twentieth-first century and seventy years into the Twelve-Step recovery movement, it is possible to forget that until the 1930s, people who suffered from what is considered by many to be the *disease* of alcoholism often did not survive, and those who did lived out their existence in a severely diminished capacity—socially, economically, and politically—in all areas of human affairs. This is still true in many countries around the world, and it is also still true in Western cultures, where recovery continues to elude the great majority of people with serious drinking problems. Some recent statistics indicate that as few as 10 percent of all people who seek recovery in Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) are still active



members of A.A. after five years, with most therefore presumed to no longer be sober.<sup>66</sup>

Based on anecdotal evidence observed by this author over the course of more than a decade in recovery groups, this statistic seems likely to be accurate. But for the millions who do stay with A.A., the recovery movement is a miracle working in their lives daily.

At every A.A. meeting, the “A.A. Preamble” is read:

“Alcoholics Anonymous is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. There are no dues or fees for A.A. membership; we are self-supporting through our own contributions. A.A. is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organization, or institution; does not wish to engage in any controversy, neither endorses nor opposes any causes. Our primary purpose is to stay sober and to help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety.”<sup>67</sup>

Through adherence to the values and principles outlined in its *Preamble* and detailed in its guide to the Program’s *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, A.A. keeps its fellowship volunteer-based and nonprofessional, unaffiliated with any other group or movement, and focused on its “primary purpose,” providing mutual support and assistance for alcoholics to help them stop drinking and to begin to live sober lives. Because A.A. members self-diagnose their own alcoholism, the medical and psychological professions are kept on the sidelines of the Program, where they can serve as resources for treatment but never as diagnosticians qualifying some but not others for membership.

### **A.A.’s Principle of Anonymity**

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<sup>66</sup> Statistics from Dick B., *The Oxford Group and Alcoholics Anonymous* (Kihei, Hawaii: Paradise Research Publications, 7. The author’s personal experience with people in recovery is that most of those who stop attending meetings have more trouble remaining sober.

<sup>67</sup> *Preamble of Alcoholics Anonymous*, A.A. Grapevine, Inc., no date.

One of A.A.'s core spiritual principles is anonymity, which, as spelled out in A.A.'s Eleventh and Twelfth Traditions, is identified as a form of sacrifice and humility that is integral to remaining sober. Anonymity, A.A. states, is the Program's "spiritual foundation."<sup>68</sup> Following are the traditions on anonymity:

"Tradition Eleven: Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio and films."

"Tradition Twelve: Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities."<sup>69</sup>

Anonymity was important in the early years of the Program, Bill Wilson explained, "because of the stigma then attached to the condition [of active alcoholism], most alcoholics wanted to be anonymous. We were afraid also of developing erratic public characters who through broken anonymity might get drunk in public and so destroy confidence in us."<sup>70</sup> Writing in 1946, Wilson stated that "the word 'anonymous' has for us an immense spiritual significance. Subtly, but powerfully, it reminds us that we are always to place principles before personalities; that we have renounced personal glorification in public and that our movement not only preaches. . . but actually practices a true humility."<sup>71</sup>

In 1955, after another decade and half of experience in the ever-growing A.A. Fellowship, Wilson explained the wisdom of the Eleventh and Twelfth Traditions by

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<sup>68</sup> *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, 13.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.* 12-13.

<sup>70</sup> Wilson, Bill, anonymous author of *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age A Brief History of A.A.* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous Publishing, 1957, 74-75.

<sup>71</sup> National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence of the San Fernando Valley, Inc. Website. <http://www.ncadd-sfv.org/understa.htm>.

describing the devastating results for A.A. and its members of “the pursuit of power, prestige, public honors and money—the same implacable urges that when frustrated once caused us to drink. . . . Gradually we saw that the unity, the effectiveness—yes, even the survival—of A.A. would always depend upon our continued willingness to sacrifice our personal ambitions and desires for the [Fellowship’s] common safety and welfare. Just as sacrifice meant survival for the individual, so did sacrifice mean unity and survival for the group and for A.A.’s entire Fellowship.”<sup>72</sup> Wilson also explained that “the Tradition of personal anonymity and no honors at the public level is our protective shield” against “the vast power struggle about us, a struggle in myriad forms that invades every level, tearing society apart.” Wilson expressed his belief that “we A.A.’s are fortunate to be acutely aware that such forces must never be ruling among us, lest we perish altogether. We dare not meet the power temptation naked.”<sup>73</sup>

***Author’s Note: “Breaking Anonymity”***

As a recovering alcoholic who has been sober and a member of A.A. for over sixteen years, I am known within the fellowship of A.A. and other Twelve-Step fellowships simply as “Paul” or “Paul B.” To this day, many people with whom I have interacted and shared deeply personal secrets and feelings for years are known to me only by their first names. I do not know where some of my friends in recovery live, what kind of work they do, or anything else about their background that they have not shared openly with members of the group, or me, as it relates to their struggle with alcoholism. Based

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<sup>72</sup> Bill Wilson, *A.A. Grapevine*, January 1955.

<sup>73</sup> Bill Wilson, Letter of February 2, 1954 to Yale University Secretary Reuben A. Holden, declining an honorary doctorate from Yale. Cited in A.A. Online Intergroup Website, [http://www.aa-intergroup.org/cpc/art\\_anon.html](http://www.aa-intergroup.org/cpc/art_anon.html). Accessed 3/10/02.

on the principles expressed in Traditions Eleven and Twelve, members of A.A. do not do what I have chosen to do in this paper, namely, “break their anonymity” in print, media, or any other public forum to non-A.A. members. I do so now because I feel my identity as an alcoholic in recovery in A.A. is a central aspect of my social location , which informs my theology and my ministry. As explored later in this paper, my own experience of alcoholism and recovery is part of the story of the evolution of the Step By Step Ministry of Recovery that must be included, making it necessary for me to “out” myself as an alcoholic and addict. Later in this chapter, we also explore how Step By Step has provided a solution to the issue of anonymity in its public worship services.

### **Beyond A.A.: The Broader Recovery Movement**

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, A.A. had entered its early adolescence as a spiritual movement, and there were movements within the program to return to the “purity” of the earlier days of the movement.<sup>74</sup> As widely reported in the media, the recovery movement has spawned numerous and often quite highly visible offshoot movements, including ones that promote recovery from addictions to other substances such as cocaine, marijuana, heroin and other narcotics, and nicotine. There are Twelve Step programs to help people deal with a variety compulsive behaviors, such as sexual compulsion or sex addiction, food addiction and eating disorders, gambling, for money and spending problems such as debting and miserliness. And there are Twelve Step programs that deal with healing the drive to create and recreate dysfunctional relationships for partners and children of alcoholics, for people in codependent

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<sup>74</sup> See Dick E., *The Oxford Group and Alcoholics Anonymous*.

relationships. Among these offshoot Twelve Step programs are Narcotics Anonymous, Cocaine Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, Debtors Anonymous, Sex Addicts Anonymous, Sexual Compulsives Anonymous, the Al-Anon Family Groups, Adult Children of Alcoholics, and Codependents Anonymous.

These programs are, I believe, natural developments of a youthful theology. Author David Crawford (a pseudonym for a recovering gay male alcoholic/addict) powerfully discusses the interconnectedness of these many addictions and behaviors in the lives of gay men, calling them “bumps in the rug” and discussing “how wonderfully recovery in one program can feed recovery in another.”<sup>75</sup> There is value to any program that seeks to provide relief, through reliance on God, for a problem which is pursued addictively or compulsively and which is capable of killing its pursuer or those in contact with the addict. This is of course the case for all addictive substances, and is also true for the deadly nature of sex addiction/compulsion (most obviously through HIV/AIDS, hepatitis, or other STDs and in less obvious or direct ways as well), for food (anorexia/bulimia/overeating/obesity), for debting (people die through self-imposed deprivation), and for all the programs that focus on healing relationships (physical, emotional, and sexual abuse again being only the most obvious manifestations of dysfunctional relationships that can end lives or can rob a person’s life of meaning, dignity, and fulfillment).

In a certain sense, all recovery programs deal with all the issues raised in the Twelve Steps but each one provides a special focus for the particular issue it addresses

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<sup>75</sup> David Crawford, (*pseud.*), *Easing the Ache: Gay Men Recovering From Compulsive Behaviors*, (New York: Plume Books, 1990), 71.

and a place for group interaction where that issue can be discussed openly and without shame or judgment. A logical next “step” for the recovery movement would seem to be the development of a Twelve-Step fellowship that addresses the full gamut of addictive, obsessive, compulsive, and self-destructive attitudes and behaviors. This is part of the impetus behind the creation of Step By Step, a pan-recovery ministry based on the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous.

### **The Step By Step Recovery Ministry** ***Origins of Step By Step***

The Step By Step Ministry is the result of the vision of Union Theological Seminary’s late Seminary Pastor, the Rev. Dr. Annie Ruth Powell, who established Step By Step as a program of the Seminary Pastor’s Office in spring 2000. Step By Step was designed as a ministry of recovery that used the Twelve Steps of the Recovery Movement as tools for spiritual growth and renewal both for people in recovery and others who were interested in learning about and taking advantage of the powerful insights of recovery programs in a context of Christian worship and practice. Step By Step’s foundational theology was built on the theology of A.A., as outlined above. Step By Step’s theology also was worked through the filter of Dr. Powell’s own theology as a minister—and more specifically as a female minister and leader—in a denomination, the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, which is still struggling with the role of women in its leadership.

### ***Influence of Womanist Theology in Step By Step***

Annie Ruth Powell was passionate in her committed advocacy for women’s active leadership roles throughout the church—especially in her own denomination as well as in the broader African American church. In her Ph.D. dissertation for Union Theological

Seminary, *A Womanist Critique of Black Churches' Portrait of Jesus*, Powell explores “the development of Black Churches’ understanding of Jesus as it relates to fourth and fifth-century creeds and the Black Liberation tradition.” Powell’s contention is that “there is a case of ‘double-exposure’ (two views) within the one portrait of Jesus held by Black Churches: (1) the ‘official’ portrait. . . officially adopted from White Churches. . . and (2) the ‘unofficial’ portrait. . . never officially adopted and given the same prominence as the creeds.” Distinguishing the two views was the official view’s failure “to emphasize the liberation of the oppressed from structural and social domination as part of the salvation Jesus offers” while the unofficial view focused on “the total liberation of oppressed black people.”<sup>76</sup>

Powell considered herself a womanist and applies a womanist critique to the claims Black Churches make about Jesus and their “serious limitation, [that] they neglect to address, in any significant way, the oppression of black women within the black community.” Defining womanist as symbolizing “black people’s resistance to their multi-dimensional oppression (i.e., racism, sexism, classism, surrogacy) similar to the way in which the Black Power concept of the sixties symbolized resistance to white racism. Womanist theologians appropriate the meaning of womanist to analyze and confront religious and societal structures which espouse ideologies of male superiority and restrict women to specific designated spheres.”<sup>77</sup> Powell notes that “womanist theologians are joined in their critique by churchwomen of African descent, many of whom experience oppression through their present involvement in Black Churches. . . .

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<sup>76</sup> Powell, Annie Ruth, *A Womanist Critique of Black Churches' Portrait of Jesus*, Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Union Theological Seminary, 1995, 316.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 4.

Both. . . challenge Black Churches to create a portrait of Jesus that is liberating for all black people, including black women, men, and children, the gay and lesbian community, and other oppressed groups. Further, they call for a portrait of Jesus that promotes genuine ecumenical conversations with other religious communities.”<sup>78</sup>

Powell also believed deeply in the “need for the revision of liturgical forms.” She was convinced that:

“Black Churches’ liturgy is so overwhelmingly male-oriented that one is either forced to make up inclusive language spontaneously, keep silent, or regress to using sexist language about God and humans. Women experience the ‘invisible invisibility’ [which] Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz describes. . . . This is how Black Churches often treat black women. They are ‘invited’ to worship in large enough number, but excluded from certain meetings. . . . What is even more painful is the knowledge that the brothers who profess to reflect the image of God are unwilling to take the effort required to include women in that image. My ultimate concern, however, is how Black Churches’ portrait of Jesus can be restored to a living portrait of liberation available to all who have faith in God and are led by God’s spirit. Black male leaders get upset when women ask for attention to their concerns, inclusion, and/or change. Many seminary-trained pastors make little effort to use inclusive language as relates to God or humans either in scripture, sermon, prayers, songs, or general conversation.”<sup>79</sup>

Annie Ruth Powell made clear her “particular concern” with the construction of “theologies that focus on health issues (e.g., AIDS, cancer, substance abuse, homelessness) and other pastoral concerns. An ongoing struggle is how to promote a genuine dialogue between church and seminary that results in joint efforts on behalf of oppressed peoples in our society and the world.” She also was “committed to working with persons of a liberation mindset to strengthen relations between feminists, womanists, women of color, and men.” Powell applied a hermeneutic of suspicion to her own beliefs by asking “how inclusive is womanism? Does concern for ‘entire people’

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid. 316-317.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 291-192.



mean that people from any racial/ethnic group can embrace womanist theology?”<sup>80</sup> It was Powell’s hope that “a womanist critique of Black Churches. . . will confront structures of domination and exercise any means necessary to liberate the entire church—women and men, regardless of sexual orientation.”<sup>81</sup>

Dr. Powell put her theology of inclusion into practice in the creation of the Christian Community Learning Center (CCLC) in 1987, a church congregation independent of the AME Church. Designed as “a non-traditional church model differing in organization structure and focus from other Black Churches,” it offered Christian education in the form of discipleship, counseling, and in-house training programs and outreach ministries in the areas of health, homelessness, substance abuse, prison ministry, family violence. Teaching was considered “a central part of worship; services [were] not characterized by the Sunday sermon; and other elements of worship [were] not subordinated to the preaching event.”<sup>82</sup> Both ordained and unordained ministers worked together with volunteers to fulfill the Center’s mission. Powell, who served as senior minister of the Center with the title of Executive Director, noted that “this non-traditional church model. . . represents one of the ways black women . . . can be involved in important ministries of the church. . . [unlike] AME and other Black Churches, [where] the pastorate represents the primary position a minister can hold in the local church.”<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 291.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. 23.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>83</sup> Idem.

In establishing Step By Step, Dr. Powell upheld the values she held so fervently of inclusion and empowerment for women, people of color, and LGBT people. To Step By Step, Dr. Powell attracted a group of largely African American church people from across New York City and its metropolitan area—women and men, clergy, lay leaders, and others, people in recovery and people for whom addictions and compulsions were not a primary concern. This diverse group came together with members of the Union Seminary community (including students, faculty members, and staff) to explore and create a new kind of ministry that used the Twelve Steps of the Recovery Movement as a launching point for worship that included prayer, song, instrumental music, personal testimonies, and preaching. Dr. Powell’s own point of contact or “qualification” for Twelve Step recovery was her own history of codependency and unhealthy relationships as well her concern for and attempts to have an impact on one or more active addicts in her immediate family at that time.

Also playing a significant role in the early development of Step By Step was the Rev. John Clinton Reynolds, Jr., Pastor of Bethel AME Church in Paterson, New Jersey and a divinity student at New York Theological Seminary. Enlisted in the fall of 2000 by Dr. Powell (along with myself a several others) to help develop the content of Step By Step’s worship services and serve with her as a worship participant and sometime preacher for the first five programs, Rev. Reynolds, a heterosexual African American man then in his late forties, himself a recovering alcoholic and addict, was at the time serving as pastor of a congregation in the inner city of Paterson that included many recovering as well as a number of still-struggling (active) addicts and alcoholics.

Reverend Reynolds' theology was deeply patriarchal and Christocentric, holding that the Twelve Steps are tools of God's redemption and conversion and that surrender to Jesus Christ as one's personal savior is necessary for the miracle of recovery to take place. He relied heavily on the Robert Hemfelt and Richard Fowler's *Serenity: A Companion for Twelve Step Recovery*, which uses the New King James Version of the Bible and on the *Recovery Devotional Bible*, which uses the New International Version. Neither book uses the kind of inclusive language found in the New Revised Standard Version or other even more inclusive translations, and his prayer and preaching reflect a traditional, masculine God. Throughout his participation in worship, he shared harrowing stories of his own experiences while active in his addictions and uses them to illustrate the power of Christ's redeeming grace in transforming him into the successful, charismatic preacher and leader as well as the sober member of society he became. After 2001, he ceased being involved in Step By Step.

During the fall, winter, and spring of 2000-2001, Step By Step held five worship services on different weeknights at Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York, usually in James Memorial Chapel. Each service focused on a different step. This author took part in planning a precursor to the first service during weekday worship in James Chapel in spring 2000, in which two other students and I gave personal testimonies of our struggles with various compulsions and addictions. I also worked with Dr. Powell in planning the first service in fall 2000 and participated as one of three people giving personal testimony of my struggle with alcohol and drugs and my journey of redemption and salvation in recovery. Rev. Reynolds and Pat Walker were the other two speakers at that first service. Four more worship services followed in the next months.

### ***The Step By Step Ministry Reactivated***

The Step By Step program became inactive as Dr. Powell became ill with a recurrence of cancer and died in April 2001. In the fall of 2001, Step By Step was reactivated as an internship program of the Seminary Pastor's Office under the supervision of the Rev. Cari Jackson, Interim Seminary Pastor at Union, and authorized by the Seminary's Office of Field Education, under the direction of the Rev. Karen L. Jones, two female, African American pastors, Rev. Jackson from the United Church of Christ and Rev. Jones from the American Baptist Church and the National Baptist Church. I, an openly gay, European American Caucasian male, was asked at a meeting on the momentous afternoon of September 11, 2001, to serve as coordinator of the program for the current academic year with the title of Minister. The program started on in October 2001 with a focus on Step Six and has operated continuously since that date.

My own social location as Minister of Step By Step bears mention in that I "qualify," in the parlance of the A.A. Program, to testify, teach, and preach on the struggle with addiction because of my experience as a recovering alcoholic and prescription drug addict. As A.A. members would say, I was a "low bottom" drinker, consuming nearly a liter of hard liquor during the last decade of my drinking and drugging and nearly ending my life through this course of severe physical, mental, and spiritual abuse. I was addicted to prescription stimulants, tranquilizers, and painkillers.

My journey in active addiction ended with an intervention in my workplace that led me to my first A.A. meeting in November 1990. I have been an active and involved member of the A.A. fellowship ever since, and have also participated in Twelve-Step programs that address problems of sexual compulsion and addiction (Sexual Compulsives

Anonymous), spending and debting issues (Debtors Anonymous), and codependence issues stemming from relationships with other alcoholics and addicts (Al-Anon Family Groups). I also have struggled with food issues ranging from overeating to anorexia but have not worked a formal Twelve-Program such as Overeaters Anonymous for those problems (yet). I come to Step By Step, therefore, as a minister who can offer empathy, compassion, and insight to others who are dealing with a variety of their own difficult personal issues.

The Step By Step Recovery Ministry began by offering three public programs per month: an interactive Step study workshop on the Step being done that month; a worship service on the Step; as well as one additional workshop per month of a special-interest group that developed out of interests expressed in the Step By Step workshops, the Food and Body Issues Discussion Group. All programs were offered on weeknights at 7:00 p.m. and programs lasted approximately one to one and a quarter hours. After the first year, Step By Step eliminated the additional workshops because of low attendance. Monthly worship services continued, offered variously on Monday or Tuesday nights to attract greater attendance, and recognizing Step By Step's evolving identity as a small-group ministry, the services were moved to the smaller and more intimate Lampman Chapel at Union.

In its third year, Step By Step added a second site at Metropolitan Community Church of New York on West 36<sup>th</sup> Street in the Clinton neighborhood of Manhattan. In its fourth year, a weekly Step Study workshop was added at Union Theological Seminary at lunchtime in Lampman Chapel. Finally, in the past year, as part of this demonstration

project, two additional sites were added and the scope and reach of Step By Step's mission was expanded.

In its second incarnation since 2001, the new Step By Step Ministry is intended to be a spiritual empowerment program for people in recovery from a variety of life-threatening as well as life-diminishing behaviors and attitudes that manifest themselves through such problems as addictions to sex, alcohol, and drugs, eating disorders such as anorexia or overeating, addictions to gambling, money issues, and disorders surrounding relationships, codependency, anger and rage, among many others. Step By Step seeks to open a wide and broad umbrella under which people grappling with a great variety of different specific issues can discover common ground in their shared feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, desperation, or despair.

Step By Step seeks to offer a place where people can come together in a loving, accepting, and supportive spiritual environment where all are welcome and none are judged. Outreach has been in the form of mailings and e-mail announcements to approximately 300 churches in New York City as well as to a mailing list of current and previous Step By Step attendees, all members of the Union Seminary community (students, faculty, and staff), flyers posted around the campus in the days before a service, and e-mails to targeted individuals. Word of mouth is also a significant source of outreach and evangelism. Union Theological Seminary includes Step By Step, including the dates and times of its services in its list of programs and resources available to the student body in its Student Handbook. At Metropolitan Community Church, all Step By Step services—not only those held at MCC but at all Step By Step sites—are listed in the annual and monthly church directories and in weekly church bulletins. Occasional

outreach has been done more widely—posting of flyers at the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community Services Center, and electronic announcements on the Community/Events online bulletin board of the Craigslist.com for the New York City community.

### ***Step By Step's Mission***

Step By Step's clear and intentional identity as a ministry is reflected in its current mission statement, which appears on all flyers and mailings promoting the programs of the ministry:

“A ministry for all people striving for spiritual wholeness, Step By Step integrates the tools of the Twelve-Step Recovery Movement developed by Alcoholics Anonymous with Christian principles, practice, and worship. In workshops and worship services, Step By Step offers doorways to freedom from compulsive, destructive, and addictive behaviors and attitudes that prevent us from reaching our fullest potential as beloved and loving children of God.”<sup>84</sup>

In this mission statement, Step By Step lays down its challenge both to traditional recovery groups and to the church by directly and intentionally linking Twelve-Step recovery with Christianity, and by stating that human beings' compulsions prevent them from being fulfilled as they were created in God's image. In this statement, Step By Step might seem to evoke original sin and the fall from grace in the statement's final sentence with its implication that addictive behaviors are dissonant with God's will. In worship and workshops, Step By Step explores the notion of addiction-as-sin and such an understanding of sin as being a turning-away-from-God, but not the sense of sin that invokes damnation or exclusion (for a further discussion of sin, see Chapter Three). Step By Step seeks to teach that by turning *toward* God and *away* from addiction, we can

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<sup>84</sup> Paul Bradley, *Step By Step Mission Statement*, drafted September 2001, Union Theological Seminary, New York.

experience fully God's love just as we can express more fully the love for others, for our neighbor, that God so deeply desires for humanity.

The hunger by people in recovery for spiritual connection in a religious setting beyond the spiritual dimension of Twelve-Step meetings is one of the forces driving Step By Step. Step By Step responds to the need to recognize that some of the most powerful spiritual activity taking place in many houses of worship happens in the basements of churches and synagogues, where tens of thousands of Twelve Step groups make their homes.

By way of personal testimony, I have visited several dozen churches and synagogues in New York City and elsewhere over the past decade, many on a regular basis, attending meetings of A.A., S.C.A., D.A., and Al-Anon. Yet like so many others in recovery, I have never set foot in the sanctuary of virtually any of these houses of worship nor met the staff or clergy of these churches or synagogues other than a sexton or other facilities person responsible for opening and closing the meeting space. My spiritual connection—which is a profound one—with these worship places is entirely through my experiences with the fellowships that gather in their meeting rooms, cafeterias, and gymnasiums—wherever the Twelve-Step meetings are held. I doubt that I know few if any members of these congregations; I certainly do not know the ministers, priests, or rabbis of these institutions from my attendance at Twelve-Step meetings under their roof. Similarly, in my own home congregation, The Riverside Church, there are meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous held twice weekly that I have never attended since joining the church in my second year of recovery.

There is almost a classic “upstairs-downstairs” syndrome in houses of worship that host Twelve-Step meetings. It is true that the members of recovery groups are often made to feel quite welcome by their hosts and that some churches and synagogues



perceive their hosting as part of a broader ministry of community service and outreach. However, few of these institutions reach out directly to these shadow members of their faith communities. The reasons for this are varied, and stem largely from the nature of A.A. and other Twelve-Step recovery groups themselves, as discussed above. Twelve Step groups are spiritual, not religious, and are intentionally unaligned with religious or other organizations. There is a significant disconnect between the Higher Power-God of Twelve Step rooms and the God of Israel, the Spirit of the Universe, or the Prince of Peace found upstairs in the worship space. The first is a God “of our understanding,” the other is defined by scripture, tradition, and creed. One is open, expansive, even flexible. A.A. members use acronyms such as “Good Orderly Direction” to define the God of their understanding or choose to consider God to be the spirit of fellowship found in the rooms of recovery. Some of these definitions might be more difficult than others for a Presbyterian or a Reform Jew or an African Methodist Episcopal congregant or clergy member to accept than others, but it would seem that the theological dialogue possible in considering and debating these beliefs could be richly rewarding.

One of the questions Step By Step asks is whether churches and synagogues can find ways to reach out to Twelve-Steppers and discuss commonalities and differences among their theologies. However, there is a second stumbling block that is far more problematic: the principle of anonymity guiding A.A. and other Twelve Step groups. If the members of the recovery group meeting in a church basement are there in principle, anonymously, how can a congregation or clergy member ethically reach out? Congregations traditionally are not founded on anonymity.

People of all faiths throughout history have been forced by persecution to meet secretly and to keep their identities hidden from the outside world. Among many examples are early Christians, Diaspora Jews, and contemporary Christians in China. Members of Twelve-Step recovery fellowships, who often have experienced persecution, discrimination, or ridicule in their own lives (as discussed above), shroud themselves in the cloak of anonymity. Therefore, although they walk openly through the doors of the house of worship where they meet, they do so with an identity that may never be revealed. Unless a member of a Twelve-Step group chooses to break her or his anonymity to a member of the church or synagogue at which he or she meets, the house of worship is extremely limited in its options for outreach and communication.

By integrating the tools of Twelve-Step recovery with open and public Christian worship, Step By Step provides potential solutions for the two problems posed above. It offers a place where people in recovery can experience a worship service that may have some similarity to as well as differences from their own personal faith background—or, if they have no formal religious exposure, provide a point of entry to the worship experience with direct connections to the Twelve Steps and other tools of recovery with which they may be more familiar because of their recovery journeys. Unlike Twelve-Step meetings, Step By Step worship services are not anonymous. Participants are identified by their full names, which often appear in the bulletins for the evenings' programs. Participants and members of the congregation share openly about their struggles with addictions and compulsions. This seems to work because all present understand that they are in a safe space where both what they hear and what they share will remain confidential.

In other words, while the name of the Rev. Paul Bradley appears on the bulletin and flyer for as the leader of a Step By Step worship service, and the presence of that name might lead some to infer that Reverend Bradley is someone who has issues with some kind of addiction or compulsion, what “Paul B.” shares at the worship service is expected to stay between myself and members of the congregation in the chapel that night. As Paul, I am safe in sharing at the worship service about having thoughts and “euphoric recall” about wanting to have a drink of my old favorite, Wild Turkey, or sharing a recollection of getting in trouble at work and nearly losing a job many years ago for drinking on the job. That kind of information is expected to be held in confidence as part of the covenant among those present, much along the lines of pastoral/confessional confidentiality or private, personal sharing at spiritual retreats and other religiously based support and discussion groups. Additionally, information shared with me privately in my capacity as Pastor of Step By Step is held in confidence according to the norms of pastoral confidentiality.

If members of a church or its ministers are struggling with addiction, do they want to bring it to the attention of their own faith community, to make themselves vulnerable and open to potential attack or retribution in such a setting? In an ideal world of love and compassion, the answer would be an unqualified yes, but in the real world of congregations, the answer is probably not. Indeed, a significant and growing number of attendees are members of the clergy. To judge from the continued interest in and attendance of Step By Step, it is clear that there is a need for the kind of ministry that Step By Step offers. It is also apparent that Step By Step is trying to accomplish a difficult balance of recovery and ministry, of acceptance and challenge, which may

ultimately appeal to only to relatively few. But even if only one life has been turned away from emptiness, destruction, and death and toward life, love, God, would this not be success enough?

Having outlined the wide range of historical influences that have contributed to the formation of Step By Step, we will next turn to the theologies that underlie the recovery movement and the Step By Step Recovery Ministry in Chapter Two.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **THE THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF TWELVE STEP RECOVERY AND CHRISTIAN RECOVERY**

#### **Introduction**

As described in Chapter One, three spiritual movements that straddled the twentieth century—the Oxford Group, with its beginnings in the early 1900s, Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.), with its origins in the 1930s, and the Step By Step Ministry, which began in 2000—have sought the transformation of their members through amended behavior and surrender to God’s greater wisdom. The theology of Alcoholics Anonymous is that of a spiritual program which grew largely out of a Christian one, the Oxford Group. While remaining officially nonsectarian, nondenominational, and non-religious, A.A.’s theology has roots entwined in Pietism and Wesleyan Methodism (among other sources discussed in Chapter One). The Step By Step Recovery Ministry seeks to return to the explicitly Christian nature of Twelve-Step Recovery without returning to the elitist and exclusivist (racist, sexist, homophobic, and classist) nature of A.A.’s Oxford Group roots, seeking rather to extend branches into modern theologies of liberation. Step By Step’s theology is working to build on the most radically inclusive promises inherent in A.A.’s unexpressed subtext of liberation theology and in so doing, to model a new kind of Christian ministry of empowerment and of profound, challenging individual transformation in which all are welcome to participate and all are valued and embraced, a theology of radical inclusion. Ultimately, Step By Step’s theology is a theology of grace, for it is only through God’s gifts of grace that the miracles and responsibilities of recovery are possible.

## TWENTIETH-CENTURY THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

### **The Twelve Steps: Van Dusen and Niebuhr Connections**

As discussed throughout this manuscript, the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous form the core of the A.A. and scores of other Twelve-Step recovery programs, providing the tools through which recovery alcoholics can undertake a plan of action to become sober and change their attitudes, behaviors, and ultimately, their entire lives. The introduction to the Twelve Steps in Alcoholics Anonymous (the A.A. “Big Book”), called “How It Works,” provides the following framework for the Steps.

“Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path. Those who do not recover are people who cannot or will not completely give themselves to this simple program, usually men and women who are constitutionally incapable of being honest with themselves. There are such unfortunates. They are not at fault; they seem to have been born that way. They are naturally incapable of grasping and developing a manner of living which demands rigorous honesty. Their chances are less than average. There are those, too, who suffer from grave emotional and mental disorders, but many of them do recover if they have the capacity to be honest.

Our stories disclose in a general way what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now. If you have decided you want what we have and are willing to go to any length to get it—then you are ready to take certain steps. At some of these we balked. We thought we could find an easier, softer way. But we could not. With all the earnestness at our command, we beg of you to be fearless and thorough from the very start. Some of us have tried to hold on to our old ideas and the result was nil until we let go absolutely. Remember that we deal with alcohol—cunning, baffling, powerful! Without help it is too much for us. But there is one who has all power—that one is God. May you find Him now! Half measures availed us nothing. We stood at the turning point. We asked His protection and care with complete abandon. Here are the steps we took, which are suggested as a program of recovery:

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

Many of us exclaimed, “What an order! I can't go through with it.” Do not be discouraged. No one among us has been able to maintain anything like perfect adherence to these principles. We are not saints. The point is that we are willing to grow along spiritual lines. The principles we have set down are guides to progress. We claim spiritual progress rather than spiritual perfection. Our description of the Alcoholic, the chapter to the agnostic, and our personal adventures before and after make clear three pertinent ideas:

- (a) That we were alcoholic and could not manage our own lives.
- (b) That probably no human power could have relieved our alcoholism.
- (c) That God could and would if He were sought.<sup>85</sup>

The Steps were written by Bill Wilson in 1938, based on Wilson's earlier A.A.

“Six Steps.” It has been suggested that the Six Steps were themselves based on six points outlined in the 1934 *Atlantic Monthly* article by Union Theological Seminary's president, the Rev. Dr. Henry Pitney van Dusen.<sup>86</sup> A review of this article reveals that van Dusen's contribution in fact was to report findings of thirty leaders of the Canadian church, who, having followed the Oxford Group closely, identified six central assumptions of the Oxford Group movement:

1. Men are sinners.
2. Men can be changed.
3. Confession is a prerequisite to change.
4. The changed soul has direct access to God.
5. The Age of Miracles has returned.
6. Those who have been changed must change others.

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<sup>85</sup> “How It Works,” *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 58-60.

<sup>86</sup> Mel B., *New Wine: The Spiritual Roots of the Twelve Step Miracle* (Center City, Minn.: Hazelden, 1991), 41.

To these six van Dusen added a seventh point, that “the greatest single secret of the Movement’s effectiveness [is] the absolutely central place which ‘the Group’ holds in its mediation of religion.”<sup>87</sup>

The original A.A. Six Steps also codified the plan of action set forth by the Oxford Group, applied now to recovery specifically from addiction to alcohol rather than for Oxford’s goal of general moral recovery (or rearmament). Bill Wilson’s original Six Steps are as follows:

1. We admitted that we were licked, that we were powerless over alcohol.
2. We made a moral inventory of our defects or sins.
3. We confessed or shared our shortcomings with another person in confidence.
4. We made restitution to all those we had harmed by our drinking.
5. We tried to help other alcoholics, with no thought of reward in money or prestige.
6. We prayed to whatever God we thought there was for power to practice these precepts.<sup>88</sup>

Clearly, these steps differed considerably from those set forth by van Dusen in his *Atlantic Monthly* article, with Bill Wilson’s version offering focus and substance specific to the struggle of alcoholics. However, similar strands are to be found between the first declaration that “men can be changed” and Wilson’s first step, with its admission of being “licked” and “powerless”—prerequisites to change. The second Oxford statement that “men are sinners” is reinforced and put into action by Wilson’s second step “moral inventory of our defects or sins.” Oxford’s third point, “confession is a prerequisite to change,” is echoed by the third step, “confessed or shared our shortcomings with another person in confidence.” The fourth point of the Oxford Group, “the changed soul has direct access to God,” most closely correlates with the first part of Wilson’s sixth step, “prayed to whatever God we thought there was.”

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<sup>87</sup> Van Dusen, “The Oxford Group Movement,” *Atlantic Monthly*, 244-245.

<sup>88</sup> “Pass It On”. . . *The Story of Bill Wilson and How the A.A. Message Reached the World* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1984), 197.



The fifth Oxford point, “the Age of Miracles has returned,” is not reflected in Wilson’s six steps except in the implied sense that for alcoholics to admit powerlessness over alcohol was at that moment a miraculous transformation hitherto virtually unknown in human history. Additionally, in an often-reprinted section of the *Alcoholics Anonymous* “Big Book” entitled “A Vision for You,” the phrase “the age of miracles is still with us” appears, reflecting Bill Wilson’s consciousness of the van Dusen material as well as its prevalence in Oxford teachings.<sup>89</sup> Finally, the sixth Oxford point, “those who have been changed must change others,” correlates strongly with part of Wilson’s step five, “tried to help other alcoholics,” and step six, “prayed. . . for power to practice these precepts.”

Despite the general similarities noted here, there would seem to be scant evidence for attributing the revelation of the Six and the Twelve Steps to Pit van Dusen or any person or group other than Bill Wilson in his social location within the fellowship of *Alcoholics Anonymous*. There is always a temptation to attribute authorship of any social document of far-reaching consequences, such as the Steps, to an authority more reputable and less humble than the likes of Bill W.

### **The Serenity Prayer: Origins and Theology**

The van Dusen connection to the Steps complements another provocative Union Theological Seminary relationship in A.A. theology, the Serenity Prayer and its author. The central prayer of A.A. and most other Twelve-Step recovery groups, the Serenity Prayer is credited to theologian and Union professor Reinhold Niebuhr. Of all of Union

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<sup>89</sup> “A Vision for You,” *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 152-153.

Theological Seminary's major contributions to theology in the early to mid-twentieth century, this foundation stone of A.A. and the wider recovery movement may be the least well known but perhaps the farthest reaching. Charles C. Brown describes the Serenity Prayer as asking for "courage and wisdom as well as serenity in social or personal perplexities."<sup>90</sup>

A number of stories have been circulated about the authorship of the Serenity Prayer. Records held by Alcoholics Anonymous show that Reinhold Niebuhr composed it between 1926 and 1932 as the ending to a longer prayer. In 1934, the Rev. Dr. Howard Chandler Robbins, Dean of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine and professor at General Theological Seminary, who was a friend and neighbor of Niebuhr, requested permission to use that portion of the longer prayer in Dr. Robbins' book of prayers, *Way of Light : A Manual of Praise, Prayer and Meditation Compiled by Howard Chandler Robbins*. In 1939, the Prayer came to the attention of an early A.A. member who brought it to Bill Wilson. When Wilson read it, he felt that it particularly suited the needs of A.A., and had the Prayer printed on cards and distributed it widely throughout the A.A. Fellowship.<sup>91</sup>

Authorship of the Serenity Prayer has been attributed erroneously to the eighteenth-century German theologian Fredrich Oetinger, after a German writer named Theodor Wilhelm who used Oetinger's name as a pseudonym published a German translation of the poem in the 1940s after receiving a copy from a friend in Canada. Others have suggested, without supporting evidence, that the prayer originated with

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<sup>90</sup> Charles C. Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age: Reinhold Niebuhr's Prophetic Role in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 1992), 113.

<sup>91</sup> *A.A. Grapevine* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1950).

Francis of Assisi, Marcus Aurelius, Boethius, or other sources.<sup>92</sup> A survey of Niebuhr biographies shows broad agreement on Niebuhr's authorship of the Serenity Prayer, although there is disagreement about the date of composition.<sup>93</sup>

Most A.A. and other Twelve-Step Recovery meetings now either open or close with an abridged version of the "Serenity Prayer," the original of which is credited to Reinhold Niebuhr. (Originally, A.A. meetings used the Lord's Prayer, and some continue to do so.) The words of the current version of the Serenity Prayer and of the longer original encapsulate the essence of the Twelve-Step theology of the God-given nature of acceptance, spiritual peace, wisdom, and the ability to take action. The longer version makes clear that this is a Christian prayer and highlights the ascetic value (not exclusive to asceticism or even to Christianity, of course) of "hardship as a pathway to peace."

The Serenity Prayer (Original version by Reinhold Niebuhr, ca. 1926-32)

God, give us grace to accept with serenity  
The things that cannot be changed,  
Courage to change the things  
Which should be changed,  
And the wisdom to distinguish  
The one from the other.

Living one day at a time,  
Enjoying one moment at a time,  
Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,  
Taking, as Jesus did,  
This sinful world as it is,  
Not as I would have it,

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<sup>92</sup> Richard Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 290-91.

<sup>93</sup> See also Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age*, p112-113 and 278; Ronald H. Stone, *Professor Reinhold Niebuhr: A Mentor to the Twentieth Century* ( Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 139-140; and Henry B. Clark, *Serenity, Wisdom, and Courage: The Enduring Legacy of Reinhold Niebuhr* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1994).

Trusting that You will make all things right,  
If I surrender to Your will,  
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life,  
And supremely happy with You forever in the next.  
Amen.<sup>94</sup>

#### The Serenity Prayer (Current abridged version)

God, grant me the serenity  
to accept the things  
I cannot change,  
Courage to change the  
things I can, and the  
wisdom to know the difference.<sup>95</sup>

Henry B. Clark believes the Serenity Prayer embodied Niebuhr's theology and its "familiar 'both/and' character."<sup>96</sup> He describes the Prayer's "remarkably edifying and energizing combination of realistic acceptance of the baffling imperfections of life and a stirring impetus to co-creativity. . . . It is a part of the essence of wisdom to be able to resign oneself to the tragedies of historical contingency without lapsing into hopelessness or inertia. 'We are perplexed, but not into despair,' states one of Niebuhr's favorite biblical texts."<sup>97</sup> Niebuhr himself wrote of the importance of "accommodating the vision of perfect to an imperfect world without losing the urge to perfect the world. . . the inevitable imperfections of life and history will be borne with the greater serenity if the

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<sup>94</sup> *A.A. Grapevine* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1950).

<sup>95</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>96</sup> Clark, *Serenity, Courage, and Wisdom*, 71.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 84-85.

ego recognizes that the blind forces of nature which frustrate the spirit are in the self as well as outside it.”<sup>98</sup>

It is easy to see why the abridged version of the Serenity Prayer was more suitable to A.A.’s non-religious and intentionally non-Christian approach. While the Oxford Group was a religious movement, A.A. made clear from the start that it was not a religion, but rather a spiritually-based group that advocated redemption, rebirth, and spiritual growth based on principles that bear striking similarity to those of Karl Barth, albeit in A.A.’s case with God as the central focus and Jesus Christ an implied presence. The figurative and often near-physical death and subsequent resurrection in recovery of each member provides the salvific element in A.A. theology.

### **Theological Parallels between Karl Barth and A.A. Theology**

The theology of Alcoholics Anonymous, like that of Karl Barth, emphasizes an all-powerful God who is utterly separate from humanity but who holds all answers for humanity. James H. Cone has observed that “Barth rightly sees that God’s decision to be for [humankind] involves simultaneously [humanity’s] decision (through the work of the Holy Spirit) to be for God.”<sup>99</sup> For Barth

“faith is conversion: it is the radically new disposition of the [one] who stands naked before God and has been wholly impoverished that [one] may procure the one pearl of great price; it is the attitude of the [one] who for the sake of Jesus has lost [one’s] own soul. Faith is the faithfulness of God, ever secreted in and beyond all human ideas and affirmations about [God], and beyond every positive religious achievement. . . . it is always a leap into the darkness of the unknown, a flight into empty air. Faith is not revealed to us by flesh and blood (Matthew 26: 17): no one can communicate it to [one]self or to anyone else. What I heard yesterday I must hear again to-day; and if I am

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<sup>98</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Reflections on the End of an Era* (New York: Scribner’s, 1934), 281-282.

<sup>99</sup> James H Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 233.

to hear it afresh to-morrow, it must be revealed by the Father of Jesus, who is in heaven, and by [God] only.”<sup>100</sup>

Barth could just as well be describing the way the A.A. program works: the leap of faith that alcoholics take when they are finally “sick and tired of being sick and tired “ and surrenders to the greater power of God. As stated in the section of the A.A. Big Book entitled “How It Works”:

“Remember that we deal with alcohol—cunning, baffling, powerful! Without help it is too much for us. But there is One who has all power—That one is God. May you find [God] now! Half measures availed us nothing. We stood at the turning point. We asked [God’s] protection and care with complete abandon. . . . No human power could have relieved our alcoholism. . . [but] God could and would if [God] were sought.”<sup>101</sup>

Similarly, Barth writes:

“God knows the mind of the Spirit in us; and this mind, because it is known of God and is the mind of the Spirit, is right-minded. In human fashion no [person] and no thing can make intercession for us. We stand alone, and are lost. But, according to the will of God, the Spirit intercedeth for us, and we are saved.... [God] makes us saints, using for our fashioning nothing that we are or have been or shall be. [God] makes us [God’s] saints, [God’s] separated ones, [God’s] instruments.”<sup>102</sup>

Barth’s description of faith life also reinforces the “One Day at a Time” philosophy of A.A., which states, “we are not cured of alcoholism. What we really have is a daily reprieve contingent on the maintenance of our spiritual condition.”<sup>103</sup> AA’s guiding theology can be well summed up in the following passage from *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*: “We of A.A. obey spiritual principles, at first because we must, then because we ought to, and ultimately because we love the kind of life such obedience

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<sup>100</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Sixth Edition, Translated by Edwyn C. Hoskyns (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 98.

<sup>101</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 60.

<sup>102</sup> Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, 317.

<sup>103</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 85.

brings. Great suffering and great love are A.A.'s disciplinarians; we need no others."<sup>104</sup> (A.A. folk wisdom describes this process as "We came; we came to; we came to believe [in a power greater than ourselves].") The *Twelve and Twelve* continues: "Such is the paradox of A.A. regeneration: strength arising out of complete defeat and weakness, the loss of one's old life as a condition for finding a new one."<sup>105</sup>

This mirrors the paradox of Barth's thinking: that "God is not found of them that seek [God], but of those who do not seek [God]. . . . And this simply because [God] is God and willeth to make [God]self known to both—as God. . . it is nakedness pure and simple before God that God which is acceptable to [God]; it is the status of childlikeness and misery which renders men accessible to [God's] justification and salvation."<sup>106</sup>

Similarly, the "Promises" of Alcoholics Anonymous outline the potential gifts of A.A.'s recovery program.

The A.A. Promises:

"If we are painstaking about this phase of our recovery, we will be amazed before we are halfway through. We are going to know a new freedom and a new happiness. We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it. We will comprehend the word serenity and we will know peace. No matter how far down the scale we have gone, we will see how our experience can benefit others. That feeling of uselessness and self-pity will disappear. We will lose interest in selfish things and gain interest in our fellows. Self seeking will slip away. Our whole attitude and outlook on life will change. Fear of people and of economic insecurity will leave us. We will intuitively know how to handle situations which used to baffle us. We will suddenly realize that God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves. Are these extravagant promises? We think not. They are being fulfilled among us—sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly. They will always materialize if we work for them."<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, 174.

<sup>105</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, 46.

<sup>106</sup> Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, 408.

<sup>107</sup> "The Promises," *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 82-83.

The Promises, which play a central part in the “liturgy” of A.A. meetings, being read aloud regularly and posted permanently on meeting-room walls, have striking resonance in the theology of Barth. The promise that “We will lose interest in selfish things and gain interest in our fellows. Self-seeking will slip away” is elucidated in Barth’s comparison of Christian love, agape, versus erotic love, eros: “I have only to love continually as a Christian, and therefore without regard or purpose for myself, in self-giving to God and my fellows, and I will come to myself and be myself.

Barth cites Mark 8:35 [“for those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it”], and Matthew 6:33, “which tells us that if we seek first the kingdom of God and [God’s] righteousness, all other things are added to us. . . . These sayings. . . show that [we are] understood and accepted and received by God.” One may save oneself and find oneself and be oneself, Barth says. “But this is something which is given, which comes, as [one] loses [one’s] life, as [one] renounces [one’s] whole self-seeking—‘for my sake and the gospel’s’—so that [one] is saved and has found oneself already.”<sup>108</sup>

In A.A., the ongoing confessional process includes personal sharing of experience, strength, and hope in A.A. group meetings, as well as individually with sponsors and other recovering alcoholics. In the formal Fourth and Fifth Step process, members make “a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves” and confessing that by “admitting to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs,” followed by the Eighth Step, in which members make “a list of all persons

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<sup>108</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*. Volume IV, Part 2. Translated by G. W. Bromiley. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1958), 750-751.



we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all,” and the Ninth Step, in which members make “direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.”<sup>109</sup>

Barth’s ideas on confession seem to mirror this process, when he writes that confessions “exist in order that we may go through them (not once but continually), but not in order that we may return to them and take up our abode in them.”<sup>110</sup> The notion of not taking abode in a confessional mode also resonates in the Promises, which state “we will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it,” which is interpreted in A.A. as “look back, but don’t stare.” Members must keep moving ahead in their lives; they must own and embrace their painful, often humiliating pasts but remain in the present, the miraculous Now that God has given each recovering alcoholic.

A.A.’s understanding of how the bonds of addiction are loosed has a central if generally unexplored link to a much more ancient (and not exclusively Christian) spiritual discipline, asceticism. By giving something up that the alcoholic, addict, or sufferer from a compulsion believes that he or she needs in order to live or function (but in fact does not), “a new freedom and a new happiness”<sup>111</sup> in spiritual harmony with a higher power can be attained. If one stops drinking alcohol, not only will the desire to drink be removed, but one’s life will gain new meaning. Stop using excessive consumption of food as a way to respond to one’s feelings and one’s life will improve and you will be able to start dealing with your issues without the buffer of a full stomach

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<sup>109</sup> See *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*.

<sup>110</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Volume III, Part 4, Preface.

<sup>111</sup> “The Promises,” *Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How Many Thousands of Men and Women Have Recovered from Alcoholism* [“The Big Book.”] Third Edition. (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1976), 83.

numbing your senses. For millions of people over the past seventy years, Twelve-Step Recovery has indeed restored lives that appeared pointless, or ruined, or truly near their end.

## **Lessons from the Desert Fathers and Mothers**

Between the years 250 and 400 of the Common Era, and reaching its height in the fourth century, a time of remarkable experiments in Christian living took place in Egypt, Syria and Palestine, uniting ancient forms of monastic life with the new teachings of the Gospel. The Desert Fathers and Mothers, as they later came to be known, were a group of solitary hermits who left the comforts of the material world to live ascetic lives in the forbidding environment of the desert regions around the Nile. They sought to follow the example of Jesus as reported in Matthew 19:21: “Jesus said to him, ‘If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.’”<sup>112</sup> The collections of *apophthegmata*, or sayings, of these men and women were collected by their disciples and followers as the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*.

Central to ascetic life for the Desert Fathers and Mothers was abstinence from many behaviors that most people then took and still take for granted. The Fathers and Mothers lived without adequate sleep, ate poor food and little of it, had very limited social interaction, wore, ragged clothing, engaged in hard work with no time for leisure, and abstained completely from sexual activity. Rebels who broke the rules of the world

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<sup>112</sup> All biblical citations are from *The Bible, New Revised Standard Version* (New York: National Council of the Churches of Christ, 1990).

that said that property and goods are essential for life, the Desert ascetics witnessed their own truth that someone who accepts the direction of another is not free, that people cannot be fully human without sex and domesticity. It is important to recognize that these “ascetic[s] embarked on a monastic career not to punish or subdue the flesh but to offer the body as a symbol of the faith. The body was not viewed dualistically in opposition to the spirit but as that portion of the person through which the faith might be acted out and become visible.”<sup>113</sup>

One of the Desert Mothers, Amma Theodora, explained the necessity of the hardships the Fathers and Mothers chose to undergo in this way: “Just as the trees, if they have not stood before the winter’s storms cannot bear fruit, so it is with us; this present age is a storm and without many trials and temptations we cannot obtain an inheritance in the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>114</sup>

The transformative experience of recovery from addiction with its trials and ultimate rewards is similar to Orthodox theology’s concept of *encratia*, or self-control, which “frees us of our self-centered neediness, that we may do good works for others. We do this out of a personal love for the natural world around us. We are called to work in humble harmony with creation and not in arrogant supremacy against it.”<sup>115</sup> There are strong parallels between the concept of *encratia* and the Twelve Step Recovery Movement’s ethos of “admitting powerlessness” and “letting go absolutely.” Despite the

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<sup>113</sup> James E. Goehring, *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert: Studies in Early Egyptian Monasticism* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1999), 33.

<sup>114</sup> Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (New York: Oxford, 1993), 198.

<sup>115</sup> Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, “Address of His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew at the Environmental Symposium, Saint Barbara Greek Orthodox Church, Santa Barbara, California, November 8, 1997, 4.

seeming contradiction of the need to lose self-control in order to come into conformity with God's will, the lesson is made clear in a version of the prayer of a later Christian ascetic, St. Francis of Assisi, which is quoted in A.A.'s *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*. The prayer appears in the chapter describing the Eleventh Step: "Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out."<sup>116</sup> The prayer reads: "For it is by self-forgetting that one finds—it is by forgiving that one is forgiven—and it is in dying that one awakens to Eternal Life."<sup>117</sup>

There are many other striking similarities between the values and principles about which the Desert Fathers and Mothers spoke forcefully a millennium and a half ago and those that undergird the Twelve Steps. Foreshadowing the critical "surrender" principle of the Third Step, "Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over the care of God as we understood him,"<sup>118</sup> Abba Poeman, using references to Jer 1:18 and Ps 18:29, stated:

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<sup>116</sup> *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1952, 1981), 96.

<sup>117</sup> This version of the St. Francis of Assisi prayer appears in full in *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, 99 as follows:

"Lord, make me an instrument of your peace—  
That where there is hatred, I may bring love —  
That where there is wrong, I may bring the spirit of forgiveness —

That where there is discord, I may bring harmony—  
That where there is doubt, I may bring faith —  
That where there is despair, I may bring hope —  
That where there are shadows, I may bring light —

That where there is sadness, I may bring joy —  
Lord, grant that I may seek rather to comfort than to be comforted —  
To understand, than to be understood —  
To love, than to be loved.

For it is by self-forgetting that one finds —

it is by forgiving that one is forgiven —  
and it is in dying that one awakens to Eternal Life."

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid*, p5, 34.

“The will of man is a brass wall between him and God and a stone of suffering. When a man renounces it, he is also saying to himself, ‘By my God, I can leap over the wall.’” Abba Joseph of Thebes reported of the three works “approved in the eyes of the Lord” the highest was “when someone remains in submission to a spiritual father in complete renunciation of his own will.” Abba Pambo stated that “one, restraining his own will, does the will of another. Now it is of such men that martyrs are made.”<sup>119</sup> Abba Mios of Belos taught that “obedience responds to obedience. When someone obeys God, then God obeys his request.”<sup>120</sup>

### **A “Theology of Helplessness” or a “Magnificent Defeat?”**

Matthew J. Raphael, the pseudonym of a recovering alcoholic who has studied the history of A.A, offers a different perspective on helplessness and submission. He describes “a powerful moral paradox at the core of [Bill] Wilson’s vision and of Alcoholics Anonymous: ‘that helplessness is a fact of human life, yet, at the same time, no one should be spared responsibility for [one’s] actions.’ . . . an elegant statement of this paradox—‘responsibility despite inevitability’—was formulated by the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr in 1939.”<sup>121</sup> This seemingly paradoxical challenge also was articulated by Niebuhr in his *Serenity Prayer* (as discussed in Chapter Three).

Another interpretation of the expression of powerlessness is taken by many anti-A.A. thinkers, characteristic of which are the words of Clifton W. Kirton, who describes A.A.’s “theology of helplessness,” where “the exercise of free choice and development of

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<sup>119</sup> Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert*, 219.

<sup>120</sup> “Obedience,” *The Paradise of the Desert Fathers* (Catholic Information Network [<http://www.cin.org>], 1996).

<sup>121</sup> Raphael, *Bill W.*, 63.

personal coping mechanisms are discouraged.”<sup>122</sup> Kirton believes that A.A. saps its members’ own sense of initiative and discourages personal accountability and responsibility for one’s actions in any arena. Many would disagree with this assessment of what I would more accurately term a theology of surrender, or, in Frederick Buechner’s evocative phrase, a “magnificent defeat.” Once again, the words of the St. Francis of Assisi Prayer are appropriate, to underscore the idea of reversal and submission to God’s will that is at the heart both of Christian discipleship and the journey of recovery from addictions and compulsions: “...For it is by self-forgetting that one finds. It is by forgiving that one is forgiven.”<sup>123</sup>

### **The Theology of Step By Step**

While the theology of A.A. and the wider recovery movement and that of Step By Step are in many ways closely related, there are certain variances and considerable differences in emphasis between the A.A. *program* on the one hand and the Step By Step *ministry* on the other. Because Step By Step turns to, and in ways *returns* to, a Christian orientation of the A.A. program’s Christian theological roots, the next logical step would seem to suggest that Step By Step’s theology would therefore mirror that of the Oxford Group/Moral Re-Armament. However, the essential difference between the Oxford Group and A.A. remains that Oxfordites were not moved to *change* their lives in order to *save* their lives, in addition to the fact that A.A. intentionally reached out to people across economic, social, and cultural boundaries where the Oxford Group chose to focus its

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<sup>122</sup> Clifton W. Kirton, “The Semantics of the Twelve Step Neurosis: Surrender, Disease, Denial and other Dysfunctional 12-Step Pathways to Personal Dis-Empowerment and Cult Dependency,” <http://www.concentric.net/~Kenr1/commonsense/12steps/kirton.shtml>, December 2001, 5.

<sup>123</sup> Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, 99.

outreach on society's elite. A.A.'s and other Twelve-Step recovery fellowship members were and are so moved to make life-saving, life-changing, and life-affirming choices. Similarly, Step By Step's congregation is invited and challenged to identify the ways in which their own addictive, compulsive, and self-destructive behaviors and attitudes are more than simply debilitating and diminishing.

### ***The Liberation Theology Subtext of Step By Step***

Step By Step draws and builds upon on a powerful (and heretofore unrecognized) theological stream within A.A. and the Recovery movement—liberation theology. When A.A. applied the pietistic theology of the elite Oxford Group in praxis to some of the most marginalized and downtrodden in society, the result was a theology turned on its head and reversed—which became something quite different and revolutionary. With the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous, Bill Wilson and Bob Smith had taken a class of persons who throughout human history had been at the bottom of society's wasteheap—alcoholics, drunks—and offered them redemption, recovery from the disease of alcoholism based on surrender of self-will to the guidance of a Higher Power. Lives thought to be lost were recovered and given meaning, often for the first time:

“Near you, alcoholics are dying helplessly like people in a sinking ship. If you live in a large place, there are hundreds. High and low, rich and poor, these are [potential] future fellows of Alcoholics Anonymous. Among them you will make lifelong friends. You will be bound to them with new and wonderful ties, for you will escape disaster together and you will commence shoulder to shoulder your common journey. Then you will know what it means to give of yourself that others may survive and rediscover life. You will learn the full meaning of ‘Love thy neighbor as thyself.’ It may seem incredible that these men are to become happy, respected, and useful once more. How can they rise out of such misery, bad repute and hopelessness? The practical answer is that since these things have happened among us, they can happen with you. Should you wish them above

all else, and be willing to make use of our experience, we are sure they will come. The age of miracles is still with us. Our own recovery proves that!”<sup>124</sup>

Addicts and alcoholics—in their active state—were and still are regarded by many as the lowest of humanity. A.A. recognizes this with words such as these: “God, in [God’s] wisdom, selected this group of men and women to be the purveyors of [God’s] goodness. In selecting them, through whom to bring about this phenomenon, [God] went not to the proud, the mighty, the famous, or the brilliant; [God] went to the humble, the sick, the unfortunate; [God] went right to the drunkard, the so-called weakling of the world.”<sup>125</sup> For alcoholics, the theology of the Recovery Movement is a theology of personal liberation. Gustavo Gutierrez describes liberation theology as being a:

“liberating theology. . . of the liberating transformation of the history of humankind. . . which does not stop with reflecting on the world, but rather tries to be part of the process through which the world is transformed. It is a theology which is open—in the protest against trampled human dignity, in the struggle against the plunder of the vast majority of humankind, in liberating love, and in the building of a new, just, and comradely society—to the gift of the Kingdom of God.”<sup>126</sup>

Just as surely as, in their emergence from the late twentieth century to the present, liberation theologies have been dismissed, misunderstood, misinterpreted, and misrepresented, so has the theology of Alcoholics Anonymous and the Twelve Step recovery movement been dismissed as a palliative for the masses, described by one critic as “Steppism” and by others as a form of mind-control, watered-down fundamentalism—

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<sup>124</sup> “A Vision for You,” *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 152-153.

<sup>125</sup> “AA and the Higher Power.” Flyer. (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous Publishing, circa 1955.) Also found online at [http://www.geocities.com/lt\\_25/highpower.html](http://www.geocities.com/lt_25/highpower.html). Accessed 1/27/07.

<sup>126</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, Fifteenth Anniversary Edition. Translated and edited by Sister Craidad Inda and John Eagleson. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 12.



harking back to A.A.'s Buchmanite roots without recognizing the revolutionary fact of recovery.<sup>127</sup>

To such critics the only response can be that those do not share the experience of addiction and recovery cannot fully understand the gravity of such a struggle, which is not to be marginalized and trivialized. Coming back from the edge of the abyss—after looking degradation and death in the face—is a transforming experience that gives one humility and a personal understanding of God's power and grace. As the founder of Black Liberation Theology, Dr. James H. Cone, explains, "how can the believer be certain that he is possessed by the Spirit? Or how can he be sure where God is at work? There are no rational tests to measure this quality of being grasped in the depths of one's being. To experience it is its own evidence."<sup>128</sup>

But for alcoholics, whose disease is one of attitudes, a "soul-sickness" as described in the A.A. Big Book, the feeling of gratitude and willingness to surrender to God's will is easily lost—unless the alcoholic stays close to the program, meaning the A.A. fellowship. For all the power of the written materials that outline how A.A. works, and the value of the Steps as a guide to living a sober life, without the community of fellow alcoholics found in A.A. meetings, there is no program. That fellowship is both a place of community and of spirit.

The first A.A. meeting took place between two alcoholics, Bill and Bob, reaching out to a third, without A.A. literature or even a formal structure—two alcoholics in the presence of a powerful and loving God who saw fit to lift up these wretches and

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<sup>127</sup> Gaetano, Salomone "The Varieties of Steppism: A Critical Overview of the Recovery Movement." Web page of Gaetano Salomone, Copyright 1995. Accessed November 1998, address not recorded.

<sup>128</sup> Cone, James H., *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969). 60.

transform an entire sector of humanity from something hopeless to a people who could not only contribute to society but who had the capability of becoming beacons of hope for many others. This was a transformation of epic, biblical proportions; it was a transformation of liberation. Remarkably, the truly revolutionary, radical, and miraculous nature of the recovery movement has never fully been grasped by the general, non-alcoholic population, who have tended to applaud the movement and embrace it widely (evidenced by the fact that in recognition of A.A.'s twentieth international conference in 1955, President Dwight D. Eisenhower sent a telegram of greeting and encouragement).<sup>129</sup>

It is important to recognize the limitation of a movement like Alcoholics Anonymous, which despite the heart of liberation theology that beats within it, is still not a force for social change in the same way that any of the other liberation movements and theologies are. A.A. seeks to rehabilitate its members and reintroduce, or sometimes to introduce them for the first time, into the mainstream of their cultures. True to its roots in the Lutheran pietism of Frank Buchman and his Oxford Group, the A.A. Program does not seek to change culture.

However, the tremendous force of the disease of alcoholism and other addictions is a great “democratic” equalizer, cutting equally across lines of economic class, race, age, religion, sex, sexual orientation, and age – in this sense, sharing similarities to the “luck of the draw” through which sexual orientation or physical disability is determined. And privilege, as history has repeatedly shown, is no determinant of recovery. The wealthiest Euro-American white man can succumb to alcoholism. The poorest lesbian of

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<sup>129</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, center insert.

color can receive God's gift of recovery and begin to build a new life. In the rooms of A.A. and other Twelve Step groups, there is a great leveling and equalizing. That is not to say that meetings are not self-selecting in the populations they attract or self-segregating, sometimes to a great extent. But there is more interchange between people from different walks of life and cultural and experiential backgrounds at A.A. than is found almost anywhere else in our society. The liberating nature of the Recovery Movement, however, is mainly its power to liberate alcoholics and addicts themselves from the slavery they have known throughout human history.

### **Lessons from Other Recovery Ministries**

Step By Step lacks the hindrance of A.A. traditions and thus is able to openly identify itself as a ministry of liberation on both the individual and global level. As a ministry, Step By Step has drawn critically and selectively on work done by other ministries and resources that connect recovery and the Twelve Steps with Christian faith and practice.

Among other theological sources for the current incarnation of Step By Step is a short but powerful work by Vernon J. Bittner, which "reconnect[s] the Twelve Steps with their Christian roots and to claim God, especially as known through Jesus Christ, as our Higher Power."<sup>130</sup> He believes that "all who use the Twelve Steps as adapted. . . can experience healing and spiritual growth and can also participate in sharing the message of God's love and forgiveness through Jesus Christ. . . [it is my hope that] this adaptation of

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<sup>130</sup> Bittner, Vernon J., *You Can Help With Your Healing: A Guide for Recovering Wholeness in Body, Mind, and Spirit* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), 133.

the Twelve Steps would help revitalize the church by making Christianity more practical.”<sup>131</sup>

Bittner contends that Twelve Step and other support groups “have discovered one great mutual benefit which Christ and the Christian church have valued for centuries—we are strengthened not only by the faith of others, but also by sharing our own faith. If we do not share it, we will be in danger of losing it. . . . None of us is fully won to Christ unless we are using the gifts God has given us to reach out, touch others, and bring them into the experience of newness of life. To possess this joy and serenity and not share it is selfish and unthinkable.”<sup>132</sup> Another useful theological source is the *Life Recovery Bible* with its exhaustive scriptural citations offering connections to recovery issues and the Twelve Steps. (More on scriptural references and aids will follow in Chapter Three.)<sup>133</sup>

While Bittner’s heart is in the right place, he and Step By Step diverge in the degree of urgency that Step By Step places on its identification of destructive elements. Bittner’s revised First Step, for instance, has no teeth: “We admit our need for God’s gift of salvation, that we are powerless over certain areas of our lives and that our lives are at times sinful and unmanageable.”<sup>134</sup> Bittner’s attempt to broaden the reach of the Twelve Steps has made it something that encompasses people who simply want an improved quality of life, not to save their lives. Where is the motivation in this?

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<sup>131</sup> Idem.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid, 120.

<sup>133</sup> *The Life Recovery Bible*, New Living Translation (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1998).

<sup>134</sup> Ibid, 17.

The handbook *Serenity: A Companion for Twelve Step Recovery*, along with the *Life Recovery Bible*, both offer the same somewhat harder-hitting version of the First Step: “We admitted we were powerless over our dependencies—that our lives had become unmanageable.”<sup>135</sup> However, even “dependencies” is a much more comfortable term to apply to one’s problems than harder-hitting and more emotionally and socially charged words such as “addiction” and “compulsion.” The Church of God Anonymous, which calls itself “The Religion of the Twelve Step Movement,” rewrites the First Step in the following way: “We admitted that we were powerless over life—that, without our belief in God, our lives would be unmanageable.”<sup>136</sup> In this version, all reference to addictions has been eliminated, replaced by a generalized statement powerlessness over existence. This rewrite seems, in fact, to be diametrically opposed to the theology of most Twelve Step groups, which focus on the powerlessness of members over certain addictions and compulsions while insisting on personal responsibility and action in all other areas. Even Karl Barth gave humankind more responsibility than the Church of God Anonymous.

Of the more than 750 reported Christian recovery groups in existence, none researched thus far appear to share the theology of radical inclusion that is central to Step By Step. It also is not clear whether there are any other Christian recovery groups that engage in worship practice, rather than incorporating Christian identity and perhaps

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<sup>135</sup> Hemfelt, Robert and Richard Fowler, *Serenity: A Companion for Twelve Step Recovery* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 22.

<sup>136</sup> Website of the Church of God Anonymous, <http://www.churchofgodanonymous.org>, Church of God Anonymous, General Service Office, P.O. Box 100, Gowen, Michigan 49326, Copyright 2001.

scripture into what are essentially “special interest” Twelve Step recovery groups for Christians.

For example, one group, Overcomers Outreach, identifies itself as a “bridge between traditional Twelve Step organizations and the church,” that uses “the Bible and the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous to minister to individuals who are affected by alcohol, mind altering drugs, sexual addiction, gambling, food and other compulsive behaviors or dependencies. Family members are welcome at our meetings.” The wide reach of O.O. across many addictive behaviors is encouraging, but O.O. lists its partners as including Focus on the Family, The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, The 700 Club, treatment centers, churches, hospitals, prisons, pastors and therapists.”<sup>137</sup>

Although the group states that it does not discriminate, I believe it is quite likely that with the various pillars of the Religious Right among its ministry partners, O.O. would treat lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals who sought its help at least as sinners who require help in “recovering” from homosexuality—if it did not reject them outright.

Following are the Twelve Steps of Spiritual Recovery as adapted from A.A.’s Twelve Steps by the Step By Step Ministry. Additions and departures from the A.A. original are noted in bold:

The Twelve Steps of Spiritual Recovery of the Step By Step Ministry:

1. We admitted we were powerless over **addictive, compulsive, and destructive behaviors, attitudes and relationships**—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. **We** came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. **We** made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood **God**.
4. **We** made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

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<sup>137</sup> Website of Overcomers Outreach, <http://www.overcomersoutreach.org>, P.O. Box 2208, Oakhurst, CA 93644.

5. **We** admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. **We** were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. **We** humbly asked **God** to remove our shortcomings.
8. **We** made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. **We** made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. **We** continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. **We** sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood **God**, praying only for knowledge of **God's** will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to **others who suffer from addictions, compulsions, and destructive behaviors, attitudes, and relationships** and to practice these principles in all our **activities**.

The theological basis for these changes is as follows. In Steps One and Twelve, the words “alcoholism” and “alcoholics” are replaced by broader, more inclusive terms to expand the reach of the umbrella of Step By Step as a program for people challenged by many kinds of compulsions and addictions. “We” is added to all the Steps after Step One, the only Step in original Twelve that begins with “we.” The reason for the change is to make the Steps easier for newcomers and recovery-program outsiders to grasp and to reinforce the central importance of Step By Step as a “we” program—of mutual support and fellowship rather than an “I” program—that is, primarily focused on self-help and therefore inherently “selfish” in the sense of being essentially concerned with the self instead of others and relationality. Although this concept is not discordant with A.A. philosophy, it receives greater emphasis in Step By Step through the repetition of “we.” It also echoes the original intention of A.A. cofounder Bill Wilson, who began each of his original Six Steps (as described earlier) with “we.”

In Steps Seven and Eleven, A.A.'s antiquated and patriarchal mid-twentieth-century use of "Him" and "His" in reference to God is replaced by the more inclusive and gender-neutral "God." This conforms with Step By Step's theology of an all-inclusive God who is both Mother and Father, both She and He, all genders and beyond gender. This also is reflected in the liturgical elements used in the ministry such as prayer and calls to worship, which employ inclusive language. Finally, Step Twelve's use of "affairs" is replaced by "activities" following the model of Sexual Compulsives Anonymous, which eliminated the former term because of its possible sexual connotation. Given the broad scope of Step By Step, these substitutions make sense as a way of broadening the language and message of these revised, inclusive Twelve Steps.

### **A Hermeneutics of Recovery: Textualizing Step By Step, its Local Theologies, and the Theology of the "Now"**

Amy-Jill Levine writes that "hermeneutics suggests that understanding arises in the encounter between text and reader. In this meeting, the reader's presuppositions, familiarity with other materials, experience, competence, community, expectations, desires, etc. include either consciously or subconsciously the construction of the meaning."<sup>138</sup> As Step By Step prepares to expand into a wider arena, it is important to consider how Step By Step's experience can be textualized—recorded and codified—so that its experience, its collected wisdom, may be transmitted. Storytelling and storylistening are at the heart of this process. Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham describe how the early members of Alcoholics Anonymous discovered that:

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<sup>138</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, "Hermeneutics of Suspicion," *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, ed. Letty m. Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 140.



“sobriety involved not only not drinking, it also required throwing out the old way of life—the old map that was their former way of interpreting reality—and learning to follow a new map, a new way of life that would allow to be both sober and alcoholic. And that way of life, they discovered, could be learned and taught only through the process of telling stories—stories that ‘disclose in a general way what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now.’ Psychologists speak of this process as ‘re-framing,’ but within the context of a spirituality of imperfection, the term remapping far more accurately conveys the idea of journey as well as the sense of discovering a new ‘map’ through storytelling. When newcomers to Alcoholics Anonymous become immersed in storytelling and storylistening, they begin to see the form and outline of a new map, which details where they are, and how they got there, and—most importantly—the way to get where they want to go.”<sup>139</sup>

Storytelling is central to understanding how and why recovery works for alcoholics and addicts, compulsives and codependents. As powerful as storytelling—testifying—is either for a Twelve Step recovery group or for Step By Step, that power can be amplified by committing these stories to text, from which they have life beyond that of the original speakers and hearers, “a fleeting event [which] appears and disappears.”<sup>140</sup> This description by Paul Ricoeur illustrates the movement of discourse from speech to text to action, a process that is relevant for understanding the importance and use of the foundational stories of Alcoholics Anonymous, but also for the formation of the narratives of Step By Step. Ricoeur’s hermeneutic of the present also resonates with the “living in the present” and “one day at a time” theology of the recovery movement as originally articulated by Reinhold Niebuhr and further explored by Paul Tillich and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Finally, Ricoeur’s concepts are illuminated by Clemens Sedman’s concepts of “local” and “little” theologies.

There is a foundational narrative of the Twelve Step recovery movement, the story of the “Man on the Bed,” in which can be found the essence of the theology of

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<sup>139</sup> Kurtz and Ketcham, *Spirituality of Imperfection*, 114, internal quotation from “How It Works,” *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 58-60.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid*, 146.

recovery. This text exemplifies several of Clemens Sedmak's theses of local theology, but particularly his statement that "we do theology because we share a vision and we experience wounds,"<sup>141</sup> and that "doing theology is a matter of being honest with ourselves and others. We do theology because we are inevitably faced with burning questions of life (beginning, end, purpose, choices) in our human situation."<sup>142</sup> The following text, which might be considered an origin myth, tells of the beginning of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Bill Dotson, the "Man on the Bed" . . . entered Akron's City Hospital for his last detox, June 26, 1935. Two days later occurred that fateful day when two sober alcoholics visited him: Dr. Bob Smith of Akron, Ohio, and Bill Wilson, a guest of Dr. Bob's from New York. A few days before, Dr. Bob had said to Bill: "If you and I are going to stay sober, we had better get busy." Dr. Bob called Akron's City Hospital and told the nurse, a "Mrs. Hall," that he and a man from New York had a cure for alcoholism. Did she have an alcoholic customer on whom they could try it out? Then she told him of a man who had just come in with DT's, had blacked the eyes of two nurses, and was now strapped down tight. "He's a grand chap when he's sober," she added. The nurse told Dr. Bob and Bill that. . . Dotson had been a well-known attorney in Akron and a city councilman. But he had been hospitalized eight times in the last six months . . . Following each release, he got drunk even before he got home. Years later, Bill Dotson reflected on the jumbled thoughts in his mind . . . "All the other people that talked to me wanted to help me, and my pride prevented me from listening to them, and caused only resentment on my part, but I felt as if I would be a real stinker if I did not listen to a couple of fellows for a short time, if that would cure them."

So Dr. Bob and Bill . . . told him of the serious nature of his disease, but also offered hope for a recovery. [Wilson described how] "we told him what we had done, how we got honest with ourselves as never before, how we had talked our problems out with each other in confidence, how we tried to make amends for harm done others, how we had then been miraculously released from the desire to drink as soon as we had humbly asked God, as we understood him, for guidance and protection."

. . . Dotson was not impressed. He said, "Well, this is wonderful for you fellows, but can't be for me. My case is so terrible that I'm scared to go out of this hospital at all. You don't have to sell me religion, either. I was at one time a deacon in the church and I still believe in God. But I guess he doesn't believe much in me." But he did agree to see Dr. Bob and Bill again. They came again the next day, and for several days thereafter. When they arrived on July 4. . . before they could say anything, he told them about his night, how he hadn't slept but had been thinking about them all night long. And he had decided

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<sup>141</sup> Clemens Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 8, 162.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid, 75, 165.

that if they could do it, maybe he could do it, maybe they could do together what they couldn't do separately. . . . on that day . . . he admitted he couldn't control his drinking and had to leave it up to God. Then they made him get down on his knees at the side of the bed and pray and say that he would turn his life over to God. . . . He walked out of that hospital on July 4, 1935, a free man, never to drink again. AA's Number One Group dates from that day.<sup>143</sup>

Viewing alcoholism from the vantage point of the early twentieth-first century and seventy years into the Twelve-Step recovery movement, it is possible to forget that until the 1930s, people who suffered from what is now widely considered to be the *disease* of alcoholism often did not survive, and those who did lived out their existence in a severely diminished capacity—socially, economically, and politically—in all areas of human affairs. This is still true in many countries around the world, and it is also still true in Western cultures, where recovery continues to elude the great majority of people with serious drinking problems.

When the co-founders of Alcoholics Anonymous, Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith, went to the bedside of “The Man on the Bed,” (Bill Dotson, also known as “A.A. Number 3,” the third member after Wilson and Smith) to bring the message of recovery from alcoholism that they had developed by sharing with each another, they had no text. As Paul Ricoeur might describe it, the founders first engaged in discourse of the spoken variety. As such, this discourse was “realized temporally and in the present.”<sup>144</sup> It was

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<sup>143</sup> “Bill Dotson—AA Member #3—‘The Man On The Bed’ accessed April 18, 2005 at <http://www.barefootsworld.net/aabilld-aa3.html>; citing, without specific page references (publication information added as known), the following works: *Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How Many Thousands of Men and Women Have Recovered from Alcoholism* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1939, 1955, 1976, 2001), 182-193; *Dr. Bob and the Good Old-Timers* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1980); *The Language of the Heart*,; *Bill W.'s Grapevine Writings*; Thomsen, Robert, *Bill W.*; Kurtz, Ernest, *Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous*. Expanded Edition. (Center City, Minnesota: Hazelden, 1991); Hartigan, Francis, *Bill W.*; Mel B., *My Search for Bill W.*

<sup>144</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, translated by Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 145.

“realized differently in living speech...[than] in writing. In living speech, the instance of discourse has the character of a fleeting event [which] appears and disappears.”<sup>145</sup>

Writing exists to fix discourse, which otherwise is lost. These “external marks” are the “‘remedy’ brought to our memory.” Writing does not fix “the event of speaking, but the ‘said’ of speaking . . . [it fixes] the meaning of the speech event, not the event as event.”<sup>146</sup>

When Bill and Bob shared what would become the core principles of A.A. with the Man in the Bed, there was no one else present and, to the best of our knowledge, there was no scribe present recording the details of their conversation. What was recorded several years later with the publication of the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* (popularly known as “The Big Book”) in 1939 was a textualization of those spoken events. These conversations both became set in time as well as set free from the moment of their original utterance and their limited existence in the memories of the two or three persons who were party to the encounters—or even to the core members of the fledgling A.A. movement to whom these stories were recounted as oral tradition. As soon as the conversations were written down, they became exteriorized and, Ricoeur might argue, alienated, the “co-presence of subjects in dialogue ceas[ing] to be the model for every ‘understanding.’”

But the act of writing in this and any case also inestimably broadens the horizon of an encounter, Ricoeur explains, as “the spirituality of discourse manifests itself through writing . . . free[ing] us from the visibility and limitations of situations by

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid, 146.

<sup>146</sup> Idem.

opening up a world for us . . . and [revealing] new dimensions of our being-in-the-world.”<sup>147</sup> What is fixed by writing is . . . the saying as said . . . . We say that such and such event left its mark on time. We speak of marking events.” Ricoeur asks: “Are there not ‘marks’ on time, the kind of thing that calls for reading rather than for a hearing?”<sup>148</sup> Furthermore, do we not “‘rescue’ the vanishing discourse when it is written?”<sup>149</sup>

Ricoeur observes that there is a distance “between the intention of the speaker and the verbal meaning of a text.”<sup>150</sup> Moving from a consideration of text to the broader canvas of human action, which can be recorded by texts but which also can be *caused* by texts, Ricoeur notes that “the meaning of an important event exceeds, overcomes, [and] transcends the social conditions of its production and may be reenacted in new social contexts. Its importance is its durable relevance and, in some cases, its omnitemporal relevance.”<sup>151</sup> Who might have predicted that the original A.A. context of two European-American, white, middle-aged, middle-class men sharing the story of their personal recovery from alcoholism with another male of a similar socio-economic and racial/ethnic background in middle American Akron, Ohio at the height of the Great Depression would turn out to have such profound relevance and wide appeal for people from other social, economic, racial, ethnic, and geographic groups?

From the specificity of Bill and Bob’s experience, transformed by the process of being committed to written text, has grown a movement that has not only survived but

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<sup>147</sup> Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 149.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid, 152

<sup>149</sup> Ibid, 153.

<sup>150</sup> Idem.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid, 155.

also thrived into the twenty-first century with broadly accepted principles. From three original members of one fellowship, there are now at more than two million members of over a hundred different recovery fellowships. The continued appeal of the stories first recorded as text in the 1930s in *Alcoholics Anonymous* support Ricoeur's belief that "not only does a work mirror its time, but it opens up a world that it bears within itself. . . . the meaning of human action . . . is addressed to an indefinite range of possible 'readers.' The judges are not the contemporaries, but, as Hegel said, history itself."<sup>152</sup>

### **Local Theologies in the Twelve Step Recovery Movement**

Viewing the story of the Man in the Bed through Clemens Sedmak's theological lens provides further illumination, and Sedmak's theses of "little theologies" find support. Sedmak writes that "little theologies can be developed using stories and examples. . . [that] connect to people's experiences. True stories have depth and authenticity that can be communicated, shared, and remembered. They become part of and reveal who people are. Sharing stories is an essential element in building community."<sup>153</sup> Understanding "theology" in Rosemary Radford Ruether's terms as "God-talk,"<sup>154</sup> and as J. Kenneth Grider does, as "announc[ing] not just what the Bible

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<sup>152</sup> Idem.

<sup>153</sup> Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology*, 154.

<sup>154</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

says but what it means,”<sup>155</sup> reinforces Sedmak’s contention that little theologies, “little stories[,] bring the *big story* [of Christianity] closer to the people.”<sup>156</sup>

In the case of the recovery community, what turned out to be the very first A.A. meeting at the bedside of Bill Dotson modeled what has followed for the next seventy years through the present day. In A.A. and other Twelve Step meetings, recovering alcoholics/addicts/compulsives tell their own stories of exile (addiction) and redemption (recovery), which reflect their own personal, “little,” theologies. Their sharing, which in the language of recovery “qualifies” them for membership in the recovery fellowship, exemplifies Sedmak’s call for “vital, local examples that spring up spontaneously and help people connect with the deeper implications of everyday events. Local theology is above all concerned with direct experiences expressed in personal examples.”<sup>157</sup>

Therefore, every Twelve Step recovery meeting gives rise to new theological expressions that further illuminate the wider, “big story” of the recovery of millions of previously lost and hopeless people from addiction since 1935. The oratory discourse of sharing about personal beliefs in Twelve Step meetings becomes an expressions of personal theology(ies) under a broad understanding of *theology* (as opposed to *comparative religion*) that encompasses other faith traditions (because the *theology* of the Twelve Step movement is not explicitly Christian).

As the stories written decades ago in the literature of the Twelve Step movement become more and more distant in time, their temporal references become more historical and, as such, potentially less accessible. One member at a Twelve Step meeting in 1994

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<sup>155</sup> J. Kenneth Grider, *A Wesleyan-Holiness Theology* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1994), 19.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid, 156.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

described “the Art Deco language of the Big Book,”<sup>158</sup> with all the resonance that this characterization implied of the text’s early twentieth century stylization and likely outmodedness. But he went on to share the power of the same text in his life today as a person in recovery. Despite the dated references, sexist language, and Eurocentrism of the narrative, the text’s power to inspire direct personal identification with “feelings, not facts”—to come alive for the reader—was clear. Written text and oratorical text interact as a member of a Twelve Step group encounters and “identifies with” the feelings of the teller of a story from the 1930s. Past and present are connected in a moment of shared experience, opening up both the reader/listener of the text narrative and opening up the text narrative as a living document.

The power of a text to transcend time and temporal references is probably most compellingly illustrated in the Holy Scriptures, whose wisdom still resonates over the centuries although the original context of the Ancient Near East in which the texts were written is so temporally distant as to be almost irretrievable. Yet the texts of the Bible live on. Why these texts live on lies in their continued ability to speak to new generations of hearers—believers—to become alive as continued revelation of God’s will for this people in this place at this time.

Ultimately, Ricoeur emphasizes, “the depth semantics of the text is not what the author intended to say, but what the text is about... the nonostensive reference of the text... the kind of world opened up by the depth semantics of the text. Therefore what we want to understand is not something hidden behind the text, but something disclosed in front of it. ...what points to a possible world... the proposed worlds opened up by the

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<sup>158</sup> Statement by Michael M., Friday Night Beginners meeting of S.C.A., The LGBT Community Center, New York, NY, August 1994.



references of the text.”<sup>159</sup> Thus, a reader of the Big Book’s “Art Deco” descriptions of someone’s struggles with alcoholism in Depression-era or World War II America can still find identification—that is to say, can recognize themselves in the feelings if not the actual facts—in the story of another alcoholic’s “hitting bottom.”

The reader can also glimpse the vision of a new world of sobriety also revealed by the narrator describing the process of transformation, redemption, and salvation experienced at that time which can be experienced anew by the reader who is ready to take the step of surrendering his/her will to God by admitting powerlessness over his/her addiction. This reinforces Ricoeur’s understanding of “the sense of the text as an injunction starting from the text, as a new way of looking at things.”<sup>160</sup> Ricoeur stresses the need for a “personal commitment” on the part of the reader to make the text his or her “own”<sup>161</sup>—claiming and owning a text and making it live for oneself.

It might be argued that the actual taking the First Step of A.A., “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable,” is precisely such a commitment, such a claiming of the text. The words of the Step are a roadmap of how the process worked for the first three A.A.’s, and how it has continued to work and still works for millions of others. One can read this Step when one attends an A.A. meeting, where it appears with the other Twelve Steps on a rolldown “windowshade” that is usually hanging at the front of the meeting room for all to see and study. It can be read in the A.A. literature available at meetings—pamphlets, the Big Book, the “Twelve and

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<sup>159</sup> Ricoeur, 165.

<sup>160</sup> Idem.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid, 166-167.

Twelve.” Making the transition from reading the *text* of the First Step and *taking* the First Step is the equivalent to jumping the Grand Canyon, to taking a leap of faith.

Active alcoholics who are not in recovery labor under the belief that alcohol is not at the root of whatever problems they may have—which are usually innumerable by the time they find themselves in A.A.—and they usually do not believe that they alcohol has any power over them, despite often striking and exhaustive evidence to the contrary. Therefore, stripping away the denial of a problem is at the heart of the First Step. Making a personal commitment to the sense of the First Step, and the subsequent eleven that follow, is essential to make the meaning and import of the text one’s own.

### **The Present and the Now in Twelve Step Recovery**

The idea of the present, so important to Ricoeur and many other theorists, philosophers, and theologians through the ages, is central to the theology and tradition of Twelve Step recovery as well. The “Serenity Prayer,” which, as discussed earlier, is prayed at the beginning or end of most Twelve Step meetings throughout the world, is derived from an original longer version by theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. His long version of the Serenity Prayer includes the lines “living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time.” A central slogan of the recovery movement (and one which has gained wide popular usage outside of the recovery community), “One Day at a Time,” encapsulates the present-centeredness of the recovery movement, which stretches from the founding Twelve-Step recovery group, Alcoholics Anonymous, to thousands of Twelve Step offshoots today including the Step By Step Recovery Ministry.

Living in the present—one day at a time—is a central theme of recovery, but what does this really mean? What are the resources in Twelve Step recovery that open up and transform the Eternal Now—or Eternity—or, for that matter, temporality? In the philosophy and theology of the recovery movement, staying in the present—“keeping it in the now”—is crucial, with the past to be understood as described in the A.A. “Promises” which state: “We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it.”<sup>162</sup> For people in recovery, neither regretting nor shutting out means “owning” the past, accepting responsibility for the pain and damage caused to others and oneself during years of active addiction, but not dwelling on the past. Alcoholics and addicts take responsibility, make amends, and move on with their lives. Similarly, they look toward the future with hope and optimism. The Promises state that “we are going to know a new freedom and a new happiness,” but that does not mean living in one’s own expectations. To use the language of psychotherapy, alcoholics/addicts strive not to “project”—not to anticipate either future accomplishments or disappointments. There is a popular A.A. saying that “expectations are resentments in embryo,” meaning that building up unreasonable hope on future possibilities can lead to disappointment, frustration, and ultimately resentment—anger at hopes thwarted.

This is not to say that one should not make plans or take actions that have long-term ramifications. People in recovery, like other “normal” people, sign apartment leases, buy homes, take jobs, get married, enroll in college, graduate schools and seminary—in other words, they make long-term commitments based on expectations that the investment they make in a residence, career, relationship, or vocational calling is right

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<sup>162</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 83-84.

for them and is something they will pursue. But even having taken these steps toward long-term human engagement, they still must continue to “live in the now” and take life “one step at a time,” being vigilant not to get too far ahead of themselves in projecting future expectations to the point of obsession and in the process lapsing back into addictive-compulsive attitudes, which can ultimately lead an addict back to a drink, drug, or whatever his/her bottom-line addiction or compulsion may be.

To give an example of healthy planning versus unhealthy projection, someone who wants to attend graduate school needs to complete and submit application materials to meet deadlines, and if accepted in a program, needs to make arrangements to leave a current work situation, find new living accommodations, move if the school is in a different geographic area, and so on. Some of these actions require considerable advance planning, which is appropriate and healthy. However, packing all one’s bags and leaving them by the door three months before it is time to leave for school would be an example of unhealthy projection. There are three more months of living in the present situation still to come before it is time to leave. Thus, beginning the process of packing up household belongings now so there won’t be a last-minute rush would be a healthy expression of planning. Packing up the entire household today and living out of boxes for three months would be an example of unhealthy projection. People with addictive personalities have a difficult time staying in the present and need the reminders and reinforcement of the shared dialogue in recovery meetings as well as the wisdom contained in Twelve Step literature such as the A.A. “Big Book.”

Ricoeur contextualizes the present by describing the term “initiative,” which he terms “the living, active, operative present answering to the present that is gazed upon,

considered, reflected.”<sup>163</sup> This bears relation to Sedmak’s description of the “tired stories and metaphors” that weaken many theologies... unexciting... standard, prepackaged examples, boring, worn out, and meaningless,”<sup>164</sup> with the remedy, according to Sedmak, to be found in “vital, local examples.”<sup>165</sup> For Ricoeur,<sup>166</sup> the present can be defined by “origin and passage.” He states: “only someone who can be projected toward the future by care—which includes desire, fear, expectation, and flight—can also be turned toward the past, through memory, regret, remorse, commemoration, or loathing... expectation and memory entire into an exchange with one another.” The present is “a now that never ceases to be the enduring form of today.” Time “shatters into the past, future, and present... evident in language in the form of negations—the *not yet* of the future, the *no longer* of the past, opposed to the pure and simple *is* of the present.”<sup>167</sup>

There also is resonance in analysis Ricoeur’s analysis of Reinhart Kosseleck’s concept of the “horizon of expectation,” a term which contains “hope and fear, wishing and willing, care, rational calculation, curiosity—in short, all manifestations, whether private or communal, relating to the future. Like experience, the expectation of the future is inscribed in the present; it is the future-become-present, turned toward the not-yet. The use of ‘horizon’ rather than a word such as ‘space’ serves “to emphasize the power of unfolding as much as of surpassing that is attached to expectations.”<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Ricoeur, 208.

<sup>164</sup> Sedmak, 156.

<sup>165</sup> Idem.

<sup>166</sup> Referencing Heidegger’s *Being and Time* among other sources.

<sup>167</sup> Ricoeur, 209.

<sup>168</sup> Ricoeur, 218.

Living in the present, in this “now that never ceases to be,” has a specific meaning for Christians, which Paul Tillich explores in his writing about the “eternal now.” Tillich writes that “the mystery of the future and the mystery of the past are united in the mystery of the present. . . the mystery is that we *have* a present; and even more, that we have our future also because we anticipate it in the present; and that we have our past also, because we remember it in the present. In the present our future and our past are ours.”<sup>169</sup> Tillich states that “in every cell of our body, in every trait of our face, in every movement of our soul, our past is the present.”<sup>170</sup> Tillich explains that “we live so long as ‘it is still today’—in the words of the letter to the Hebrews. [But] not every body, and nobody all the time, is aware of this ‘eternal ‘now’ in the temporal ‘now.’ But sometimes it breaks powerfully into our consciousness and gives us the certainty of the eternal, of a dimension of time which cuts into time and gives us our time.”<sup>171</sup>

Tillich observes that the notion of eternity is misunderstood by:

many people . . . [who] hope for a continuation of this life after death. They expect an endless future in which they may achieve or possess what has been denied them in this life. This is a prevalent attitude about the future . . . [which] denies that there is an end. It refuses to accept that we are creatures, that we come from the eternal ground of time and return to the eternal ground of time and have received a limited span of time as *our* time. It replaces eternity by endless future. But endless future is without a final aim; it repeats itself and could well be described as an image of hell. This is not the Christian way of dealing with the end. The Christian message says that the eternal stands above past and future. “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.” The Christian message acknowledges that time runs towards an end, and that we move towards the end of that time which is our time. Many people—but not the Bible—speak loosely of the “hereafter” or of the “life after death” . . . [and] “world without end.” But the world, by its very nature, is that which comes to an end. If we want to speak in truth without foolish, wishful thinking, we should speak about the eternal that is neither timelessness nor endless time. The mystery of the future is answered in the eternal of

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<sup>169</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Eternal Now* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1963), 130.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid, p.127.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid, p130-131.

which we may speak in images taken from time. But if we forget that the images are images, we fall into absurdities and self-deceptions. There is no time *after* time, but there is eternity *above* time.”<sup>172</sup>

Tillich concludes that “there is one power that surpasses the all-consuming power of time—the eternal: He Who was and is and is to come, the beginning and the end. He gives us courage for what is to come. He gives us rest in His eternal Presence.”<sup>173</sup> This statement resonates in the section of the A.A. Big Book entitled “How It Works,” which cautions: “Remember that we deal with alcohol—cunning, baffling, powerful! Without help it is too much for us. But there is One who has all power. That One is God. May you find Him now!”<sup>174</sup>

Presenting another Christian perspective on “the problem of time-focus,” Donald W. Shriver, Jr. suggests that “many faithful Christians...forget neither the ‘now’ nor the ‘then’ of God’s will for earth, neither the short nor the long of it. We go about today’s tasks in the faith that they too are important for God’s purposes. This very moment is a moment of eternity.”<sup>175</sup>

Ricoeur might equate this with the “force of the present,” Nietzsche’s term for the “interruption that the living present makes with respect, if not to the influence of every past, at least to the fascination that the past exerts upon us.”<sup>176</sup> The Twelve Step recovery slogan for this concept is “look back, but don’t stare,” harking back to the Promises once again and their promise of neither regretting the past, nor shutting the door on it, unlike

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<sup>172</sup> Tillich, *The Eternal Now*, 125.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid, 132.

<sup>174</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 59.

<sup>175</sup> Donald W. Shriver, Jr. *The Lord’s Prayer: A Way of Life* (Atlanta, John Knox Press, 1983), 42.

<sup>176</sup> Ricoeur, 222.

the many who follow Lot's wife and become frozen in their thrall of that which they have already left behind. Only "the force of the present" can summon the strength "to refigure time.... the force that gives to our ethical and political aims in the future the strength to reactivate the unfulfilled potentialities of the past transmitted to us."<sup>177</sup>

Ricoeur believes that "we must fight against the tendency to consider the past simply as completed, unchangeable, over and done with. The past must be reopened, and the unaccomplished, thwarted, even massacred potentialities rekindled."<sup>178</sup> The past can be disclosed as a "living tradition."<sup>179</sup> The process of recovery over a period of years makes this clear, as past relationships can be mended and rebuilt and the meaning of past events clarified or opened for radical reinterpretation. Resurrection is a reality in the lives of people in recovery, with the power of the ever-unfolding present to transform both the past and the future among its most powerful manifestations.

### **Christology of Twelve Step Recovery**

It is important to address, however briefly, the role of Christ, or of Christian belief, in Twelve Step recovery, as differentiated from Step By Step. How can the Revelation of Christ's life, crucifixion, and resurrection be reconciled with the theology of Alcoholics Anonymous, in which God is often referred to as a "Higher Power" and Christ does not receive mention at all? Part of the success of A.A. lies in the fact that it is not an organized religion but instead a spiritual movement, which encourages members to

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<sup>177</sup> Idem.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid, 221.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid, 222.



follow their own spiritual paths in other organized religions. In other words, Christ can be perceived parenthetically within the belief system that A.A. propounds. Christian members of A.A., or members who decide to explore or discover Christ's message, can utilize A.A. principles to complement and enrich their own Christian practices in the church. (This is the point of entry as well for the Step By Step Recovery Ministry, which, as an intentionally Christian worship program, integrates the Twelve Steps and recovery theology.) Further, the absence of any explicit connection to Christ (or a particular form of Christology for that matter) either in A.A. literature or practice allows room for Unitarian Universalists, other non-Christians (in particular, Jews) and, to a lesser extent, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and followers of other world religions, to partake of A.A.'s ecumenical offerings without fear of being proselytized into Christianity.

Anthropologist Paul Antze has written "that A.A.'s whole outlook owes a major debt to Christianity is obvious enough. Indeed, the group's emphasis on an experience of radical despair leading to a 'spiritual awakening' (an experience that Martin Luther called *metanoia*) indicates that the operative model may be more narrowly a Protestant one. . . .A.A.'s teachings draw their essential logic from Protestant theology of a very traditional kind. Once certain substitutions are made, in fact, there is a point-by-point homology between A.A.'s dramatic model of the alcoholic's predicament and the venerable Protestant drama of sin and salvation."<sup>180</sup>

A.A.'s Christian value system remains right below the surface where it was embedded by the founders and earliest proponents of A.A., particularly the highly

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<sup>180</sup> Paul Antze, "Symbolic Action in Alcoholics Anonymous," *Constructive Drinking: Perspectives on Drink from Anthropology*, ed. Mary Douglas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 173-74.

influential Rev. Sam Shoemaker, as discussed in Chapter One. Christian influence is most plainly evident in the fact that for many years, the Lord's Prayer was the traditional closing for every A.A. meeting, until in recent years it began to be supplanted by the nondenominational short-version Serenity Prayer by Reinhold Niebuhr, which, as discussed earlier, itself originated in its longer version as a Christian prayer. Therefore, precisely because A.A. "is not allied with any sect [or] denomination,"<sup>181</sup> as stated the A.A. Preamble, also read at every meeting, it is possible to reconcile A.A.'s guiding theology with Christianity.

Another cornerstone of recovery theology is the idea of acceptance—and this also is inextricably tied to living life in the present. A valuable perspective on acceptance comes from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who from his prison cell in Germany articulated a theology of living-in-the-present in 1944. According to Ralf Wüstenberg, this was developed at least in part in response to reading Dilthey as a "philosopher of life." Bonhoeffer wrote: "I believe that we honor God better when we become familiar with the life he has given us in all its value, when we become familiar with it, exhaust it, and love it, and for that reason also perceive strongly and sincerely the pain brought about by those particular life values that have been damaged or lost." This is living in the present, fully, in all its glory and all its pain, something that was very much on Bonhoeffer's mind as he sat in his prison cell. Through this depth of acceptance, of present-centeredness, one can be "A Christian in the full scope of this term."<sup>182</sup> Bonhoeffer also noted that it was not easy "to live out joy correctly, to order it and tie it in to daily life." Further illuminating

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<sup>181</sup> "A.A. Preamble," Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, n.d.

<sup>182</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand und Ergebung. Neuauflage* [Letters and Papers from Prison] (Munich: Kaiser, 1985), 215, unpublished translation by Doug Scott, cited in Ralf K. Wüstenberg, *Theology of Life: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Religionless Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 115.

Bonhoeffer's conception of time, Shriver quotes him as believing that faithful Christians must live "in many different dimensions" at once.<sup>183</sup>

### **Textualizing Step By Step**

The process that the Step By Step Recovery Ministry is undergoing today is similar to that which the Twelve Step recovery movement experienced sixty-five years ago, as the narratives and practices of the Ministry are beginning to be codified and committed to paper, becoming texts soon to have a life of their own beyond the confines of the imagination of their creator—myself and others. This Doctor of Ministry Demonstration Project is one important way in which Step By Step's experience and learnings are being textualized for a wider future application.

Step By Step can keep its focus in the present and in the now by lifting up the central value of the living narratives of group members as they share their own experience, strength, and hope in Twelve Step recovery, through the working of God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit in their lives. The specificity of its current settings and the social location of its present leaders need not hinder Step By Step's expansion and acceptance any more than did the characteristics of the early A.A. members—so long as the guiding principle of Twelve Step recovery, "the only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking (etc.)," remains central to Step By Step's mission. Upholding this mission in the context of modeling Christ's perfect and unconditional love for all of

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<sup>183</sup> Shriver, *The Lord's Prayer*, 43, citing Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Prayers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, enlarged edition (New York: Macmillan, 1971). 310.

God's beloved community can help Step By Step remain present-centered and open to the transformative power of God's love to shape and reshape past, present, and future.

One of Sedmak's theses of local theology states that "Jesus did theology to build up community. He called everyone into community, a community that is constantly on the move. Doing theology as Jesus did is a community-building enterprise."<sup>184</sup> Recovery from addictions and compulsion as practiced by the Twelve Step movement is done in community and relies on the support of members of the community for its growth and sustenance. It is a movement that builds on the local and particular, through the telling of each person's individual story of her or his "daily reprieve" from addiction (death) "contingent on the maintenance of our spiritual condition."<sup>185</sup> That story is mirrored with another member's story, and this dialogue is amplified by the texts of stories recorded in the ever-growing annals of recovery literature—books, magazines, journals, newsletters, and tapes, as well as internet sites, bulletin boards, chatrooms, and online meetings. In this way the recovery community reinforces its beliefs and practices even as it continually transcends its specific localities. It is indeed true that, despite surface differences, an A.A. meeting is the same anywhere in the city, the country, or the world—to which this author can attest based on first-hand experience in meetings throughout the nation and around the world.

This is another way that recovery theology follows the pattern of "the community that Jesus founded [which is]. . . characterized by its intrinsic tendency to overcome local contexts. . . It is Jesus, not a place. . . that gives the community its local identity."<sup>186</sup> For

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<sup>184</sup> Sedmak, 31.

<sup>185</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 85.

<sup>186</sup> Sedmak, 32.

Twelve Step recovery, identity is forged the solidarity of the shared struggle against the disease, to live in the present and the now, sinful-yet-redeemed, as together addicts “rekindle,” in Ricoeur’s words, the “massacred potentialities”<sup>187</sup> of what once seemed to be hopeless, shattered lives.

### **New Forms of Grace: the Theology of Body and Disability in Recovery**

Alcoholism and other addictions and compulsions are diseases of the mind, body, and spirit. As explored earlier, alcoholism has been perceived differently in different times, sometimes as a disability, other times as an illness, and too often as a sign of weakness or moral depravity—being outside of God’s favor. How should Step By Step view the addictions, compulsions, and destructive behaviors of its members? How can we find liberating and affirmative ways to embrace woundedness, differentness? A model used in a theology of disability developed by Ron Whyte is instructive.

“we are used to perceiving grace primarily in the traditionally defined forms of beauty—the blossoming flower, the animal at ease, the “classic” bodies of statues and ecstatic forms of dancers. What grace is there in twisted limbs, or in bodies that have no limbs at all? Yet, if we look, we shall find here not anarchy, but new of forms of order consistent unto themselves. Each disabled person is a perfectly whole and orderly being, no matter how far he or she diverges, mentally or physically, from the norm and order of the majority. Once we realize this, we can perceive a comeliness in the consistency of an affliction. There is ease, symmetry, balance, harmony and grace, if only we open ourselves, perceive, and acknowledge what we perceive. The disabled bring us new forms of grace. The most important aspect of being human is encompassed in the word ‘grace....’ grace is the central experience in all religions, that God is grace, that God’s grace is freely given and can be chosen and manifests itself most visibly and beautifully in the human body [in all its forms].... it is apparent that the Christ, to indeed be the Christ, must also be a disabled person.”<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> Ricoeur, 221.

<sup>188</sup> Whyte, Ron, “New Forms of Grace,” *The Journal of Current Social Issues*, Vol. 15, No.3, fall 1978, Special Issue on “The Rebirth of Imaginative Vision.”

Respect for the body is central to Twelve Step practice and, by extension, theology, which teaches its members to “listen to their bodies,” a novel concept to many who have spent their lives denying their physical and emotional feelings by “stuffing” them with alcohol or drugs, or with food or the lack thereof, with unhealthy sexuality, with spending, with deprivation, and on and on. To know when we are genuinely hungry, to understand when we truly are feeling ill—not merely recovering from another physical or emotional hangover from a bout of substance abuse or other form of dysfunction, to experience the full and sometimes frightening spectrum of our emotions—happiness, sadness, anger, fear, joy, love. These are wonderful gifts of recovery whose development requires careful attention and nurturing.

People in recovery are very much like hothouse flowers, raised in artificial conditions and unused to experiencing “life on life’s terms” that others may take for granted. They emerge on the stage of life full-grown, apparently normal, but feeling like children, or immigrants in a strange land, incredibly vulnerable and unsure of what is expected of them. This invisible difference of life experience, of attitudes, of absence of emotional armor, sets those in recovery apart just as potently as does a lack of ability to walk, a color of skin other than that of the dominant race, a sex other than male, a sexual orientation other than straight, a nationality other than Euro-American, an age other than young.

### **Step By Step and the Theology of Imperfection**

Also germane to Step By Step is the theology and spirituality of imperfection developed by Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham. They explain how addiction and recovery offer a pathway to spiritual growth and enlightenment.

“God comes through the wound. The descent to the depths brings the realization that without help one is lost. The spirituality of imperfection is the spirituality of the weak and the broken, the poor and the humble. It is and always has been a spirituality for people with large and strong passions, with troubled pasts and uncertain futures, a spirituality both ordinary and unconventional. For those who live a spirituality of imperfection seem always, somehow, to combine those two paradoxical qualities, to be both ‘ordinary’ and ‘unconventional.’ Socrates quietly declined to wear shoes, Jesus Christ turned the other cheek, Francis of Assisi watched placidly as ‘Brother Fire’ consumed his home. Julian of Norwich encouraged the contrite that God wants saints who have been sinners, Caussade insisted that the fruit of grace is discovered in the ‘abyss’ of our ‘wretchedness,’ Gandhi and Martin Luther King practiced passive resistance in extraordinarily violent times. . . The spirituality of imperfection, of which Alcoholics Anonymous forms a modern tributary, has always flowed in unpredictable directions. In fact, the whole story of Alcoholics Anonymous [and therefore of the recovery movement as a whole] might be summed up as an ongoing quest for a nonconventional spirituality.”<sup>189</sup>

Step By Step seeks to promote just such a nonconventional theology of radical inclusiveness, based on the shared belief that God created humankind in God’s own image, and because She did, that all of God’s children are equally beautiful and each is a wondrous expression of God’s own wonderfully, mysteriously unknowable Self. What is true for the alcoholic, the addict, the gambler, the obsessive-compulsive, the codependent, then, also is what has been demonstrated to be true for the African American, for the woman, for the disabled person, for the lesbian, for the Latina and Latina, for the Asian American, and for the vast majority of peoples in the non-American, non-Western, and non-Christian world. That is: all human beings, all living things, every part of the planet and the universe, all are part of God’s creation, cherished and beloved.

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<sup>189</sup> Kurtz, *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, 111.

And if Christians are to continue to bear witness to the power of Christ's love for the next millennium, Christians must believe, to paraphrase James H. Cone, that Jesus was a drunk, just as surely as Jesus was black, Latina, female, disabled, gay, poor, hungry, homeless. For God is found on the margins—the spaces where the meaning is laid bare and revealed—and from the margins God has lifted up the most hopeless of God's flock—including the alcoholic—to make them bearers of Christ's message of hope, love, and redemption, of transformation and liberation in the face of almost unimaginable odds.

### **Toward a New Theology of Inclusion and Affirmation**

In its seven years of existence, Step By Step has attracted a broad cross-section of people representing a variety of recovery issues and a range of backgrounds. Attendees have included people from within the Seminary community and from the outside, lay, clergy, and seminarians, and include African American and European-American men and women. Approximately one-third of attendees have tended to be lesbian, gay or bisexual. Some attendees are active in their addictions and compulsions and others are in recovery. Some, in the opinion of this author, are still in denial about various aspects of their diseases. Among the recovery issues confronting participants include alcoholism, drug addiction, eating disorders from overeating to anorexia and bulimia, spending and debting issues, and family and relationship issues. Several members are adult children of alcoholics/addicts and of these some have also been in relationships with active alcoholics/addicts.



The portrait of Step By Step from the congregations who attend its worship services and other meetings brings to mind the hope that a former United Church of Christ President, the Rev. Dr. Paul Sherry, expressed for the future of the denomination he had led for more than a decade. He wrote of the essential importance of embracing lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender members and clergy as full participants in all levels of the U.C.C., and his words express well the highest hopes for Step By Step to be an inclusive and embracing church that welcomes and affirms all of God's children:

"I believe our voice among the churches and within our society is urgently needed, bearing witness to the belief that God cherishes all and dignifies all. . . persons as gifts of God, called with us by their baptism into the fullest participation in God's mission of reconciliation in the world. I am convinced this voice will have power insofar as it is a voice shaped by the language of faith and the experience of worship, a voice in which the liberating truth of the Bible can be heard, and the courageous spirit of the saints will be echoed. By that voice, I believe, our churches will be renewed. More importantly, in that voice, I believe, the lonely will be called to companionship, the frightened will find comfort, the abused will know safety, and those sisters and brothers in Christ who have lost hope will rediscover the blessing of their baptism: Child of God, disciple of Christ, member of Christ's Church."<sup>190</sup>

Step By Step as well must answer Sherry's call to be a prophetic ministry that models just such a reconciling, affirming, inclusive, and transformative community in which all of God's children regardless of their woundedness, vulnerabilities, differentness or "afflictions" are welcome and raised up for leadership, for ministry, for prophecy, for service—as befits the gifts given to them by the Creator. Prayerful consideration must always be given to embrace those who are still excluded from our midst as we claim Christian fellowship for all. In Step By Step, we can witness and model Paul's message

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<sup>190</sup> Sherry, Paul H., "Now, No Condemnation: The Rights of Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Persons in Society and their Membership and Ministry in the Church: A Pastoral Letter to the United Church of Christ," United Church of Christ, Cleveland, Ohio, November 1998.

in his letter to the Romans (12:5) that “we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another.”

One such group to be lifted up has been attending Step By Step in significant numbers—lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people—who are dealing with recovery issues. They are part of a population in recovery who describe themselves not only as “recovering addicts,” “recovering alcoholics,” or “recovering bulimics,” but also only as “recovering Christians” or “recovering Roman Catholics”—particularly in the case of LGBT people, so many of whom have been severely damaged by their faith communities of origin.<sup>191</sup> The established church historically has not created a safe and welcome space for most LGBT people, and many have been forced out by denominations, pastors, and congregations who declare them to be sinners or unqualified to participate fully in ministry or congregational leadership. Understandably, many in recovery have chosen to turn their backs not only on their own churches but on organized religion as a whole.

Coming into recovery programs such as A.A., LGBT people reconnect with their yearning for spirituality and discover a face of God—what Twelve-Step literature describes as “a loving God of our understanding”—quite different from the usually judgmental and punishing deity they experienced as Catholics, Baptists, Pentecostals, Methodists, or Mormons. Although far from perfect in their acceptance of LGBT people, Twelve-Step groups are places of relatively high levels of openness and acceptance. Remarking on the culture of acceptance that is at the heart of A.A., Harry Emerson Fosdick noted that “the meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous are the only place, so far as I

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<sup>191</sup>See Chapter \_\_\_\_ for survey results about Step By Step attendees for further insight on the religious backgrounds, current religious practices, and sexual orientation of Step By Step participants.

know, where Roman Catholics, Jews, all kinds of Protestants and even agnostics get together harmoniously on a religious basis.”<sup>192</sup>

The fourth edition of A.A.’s “Big Book” includes stories of (openly) gay and lesbian alcoholics for the first time; A.A. first authorized the establishment of “special interest” meetings for gays and lesbians nearly thirty years ago, providing crucial places of sanctuary for LGBT people to deal openly and honestly with issues of recovery where their sexual orientation would not need to be disguised or hidden. Other programs, such as Sexual Compulsive Anonymous, were created expressly to answer the need for a safe space in which LGBT people could share their struggles with issues around sexuality and intimacy, in response to the homophobia of other sexual-addiction fellowships.

## **Conclusion**

Perhaps Step By Step’s biggest challenge and greatest opportunity in its seventh year of ministry—and on the verge of a great expansion of its reach, range, breadth, and scope—is to claim its own place, to stand against the inherent conservatism of both the recovery movement and the church universal to promote a nonconventional theology of radical inclusiveness, based on the shared belief that God created humankind in God’s own image, and because God did, that all of God’s children are equally beautiful and each is a wondrous expression of God’s own wonderfully, mysteriously unknowable Self. If Step By Step is to grow and continue its ministry of radical inclusion, it must continue to reach out to, and keep faith with, the marginalized and with those on the borders and boundaries of life, and from that perspective—where God, Christ, and the Spirit are

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<sup>192</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Living of These Days* (New York: Harper, 1957), 287.

always the most present—to act and to speak out for healing, for empowerment and social justice, all the while praying for discernment and vigilance to continue striving for the inclusion of all at God’s bounteous table.

Ultimately, the theology of recovery is a theology of grace, which Tom Driver describes as “an ethic which beings and ends in attitudes of life acceptance, passing through moral choices in between.”<sup>193</sup> Mercandante calls grace nothing less than God reaching out toward us.... God’s self-giving.”<sup>194</sup> With this understanding, acceptance, awareness, action—the watchwords of Twelve Step recovery—are all gifts made possible by the gift of recovery, are the results of God’s grace.

Having explored the history and theology of the Twelve-Step recovery movement and the Step By Step Recovery Ministry, we will turn in Chapter Three, Addiction, Recovery, Science, and Sin in the Sacred Texts of Christian Recovery.

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<sup>193</sup> Tom F. Driver, *Patterns of Grace: Human Experience as Word of God* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1977), p xxiii.

<sup>194</sup> Mercadante, 172.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **ADDICTION, RECOVERY, SCIENCE, AND SIN IN THE SACRED TEXTS OF CHRISTIAN RECOVERY**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter explores the sacred texts of Christian recovery, exploring both the secular texts of recovery and The Bible as it pertains to recovery—how Holy Scripture views addiction and recovery, in the broader context of sin, healing, and forgiveness. Our examination of the concept of sin in addiction begins with a review of the prevailing “disease concept” of addiction—popularized by Alcoholics Anonymous and widely accepted by the scientific and medical communities and much of society. The understanding of alcoholism as disease stands in contrast to the historic view of alcoholism as sin, still held by many Christian communions. Both the disease and sin models of addiction have profound ethical and moral implications. Finally, recognizing that justice is at the heart of the Judeo-Christian message, this chapter will explore recovery from the perspective of justice—what is the church’s responsibility to addicts and what responsibilities do people in recovery have to make “justice roll down like waters?”

#### **SACRED TEXTS**

##### **Texts of Recovery**

There are two kinds of sacred texts in the Christian recovery ministry of Step By Step—the Bible and related Scripture, and the literature of the Twelve Step recovery movement. To provide a context for our examination of Holy Scripture as it pertains to

Christian recovery, we will begin by reviewing the literature of Twelve-Step recovery. The two primary texts of Twelve-Step recovery are *Alcoholics Anonymous* (the “Big Book”), and *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (the “Twelve and Twelve”), which explores the meaning and practice of each of the Twelve Steps. The Twelve and Twelve begins with a listing of the Steps along with a short synopsis of each Step. This synopsis, along with selections of the full text from the full chapters on each Step, are used in Step By Step’s weekly Step Study meeting as well as in its worship services. Adapted from these principal resources are Step By Step’s “Promises of Spiritual Recovery,” taken from the text of “The Promises” in the Big Book, and Step By Step’s adaptation of the “Twelve Steps of Spiritual Recovery.” (See Chapter Two for a discussion of the rationale for these adaptations and departures from the original Twelve Steps.)

The original Twelve Steps are as follows:

#### The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.<sup>195</sup>

#### The Central Message of Each of the Twelve Steps<sup>196</sup>

- Step 1. Honesty
- Step 2. Hope
- Step 3. Faith
- Step 4. Courage
- Step 5. Integrity
- Step 6. Willingness
- Step 7. Humility
- Step 8. Fellowship and Love
- Step 9. Justice
- Step 10. Perseverance
- Step 11. Spirituality
- Step 12. Service

#### Short Synopses of the Twelve Steps<sup>197</sup>

STEP ONE: *“We admitted we were powerless over addictive, compulsive, and destructive behaviors and attitudes—that our lives had become unmanageable.”*  
Who cares to admit complete defeat? Admission of powerlessness is the first step in liberation. Relation of humility to sobriety. In the case of addictions, we have a mental plus physical allergy. Why must every addictive and compulsive person hit bottom?

STEP TWO: *“Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.”*  
What can we believe in? Recovery does not demand belief; the Twelve Steps are only suggestions. Importance of an open mind. Variety of ways to faith. Substitution of recovery groups for a higher power. Plight of the disillusioned. Roadblocks of indifference and prejudice. Lost faith found in recovery. Problems of intellectuality and self-sufficiency. Negative and positive thinking. Self-righteousness. Defiance is an outstanding characteristic of addictive and compulsive people. Step Two is a rallying point to sanity. Right relation to God.

STEP THREE: *“Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God*

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<sup>195</sup> *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1952, 1953, 1981), 5-9.

<sup>196</sup> From popular handout available at A.A. meetings, author unknown.

<sup>197</sup> *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, 5-13.

*as we understood [God].”*

Step Three is like the opening of a locked door. How shall we let God into our lives? Willingness is the key. Dependence is a means to independence. Dangers of self-sufficiency. Turning our will over to our higher power. Misuse of willpower. Sustained and personal exertion necessary to conform to God's will.

STEP FOUR: *“Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.”*

How instincts can exceed their proper function. Step Four is an effort to discover our liabilities. Basic problem of extremes in instinctive drives. Misguided moral inventory can result in guilt, grandiosity, or blaming others. Assets can be noted with liabilities. Self-justification is dangerous. Willingness to take inventory brings light and new confidence. Step Four is the beginning of a lifetime practice. Common symptoms of emotional insecurity are worry, anger, self-pity, and depression. Inventory reviews personal relationships. Importance of thoroughness.

STEP FIVE: *“Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.”*

The Twelve Steps deflate the ego. Step Five is difficult but necessary to sobriety, recovery, and peace of mind. Confession is an ancient discipline. Without fearless admission of defects, few could stay sober or in recovery. What do we receive from Step Five? Beginning of true kinship with humanity and God. Lose sense of isolation, receive forgiveness and give it; learn humility; gain honesty and realism about ourselves. Necessity for complete honesty. Danger of rationalization. How to choose the person in whom to confide. Results are tranquillity and consciousness of God. Oneness with God and our fellow human beings prepares us for following Steps.

STEP SIX: *“Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.”*

Step Six is necessary to spiritual growth. The beginning of a lifetime job. Recognition of difference between striving for objective and perfection. Why we must keep trying. “Being ready” is all-important. Necessity of taking action. Delay is dangerous. Rebellion may be fatal. The point at which we abandon limited objectives and move toward God's will for us.

STEP SEVEN: *“Humbly asked [God] to remove our shortcomings.”*

What is humility? What can it mean to us? The avenue to true freedom of the human spirit. Necessary aid to survival. Value of ego-puncturing. Failure and misery transformed by humility. Strength from weakness. Pain is the admission price to new life. Self-centered fear chief activator of defects. Step Seven is change in attitude which permits us to move out of ourselves toward God.

STEP EIGHT: *“Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.”*

This and the next two Steps are concerned with personal relations. Learning to live with others is a fascinating adventure. Obstacles: reluctance to forgive; nonadmission of wrongs to others; purposeful forgetting. Necessity of exhaustive survey of the



past. Deepening insight results from thoroughness. Kinds of harm done to others. Avoiding extreme judgments. Taking the objective view. Step Eight is the beginning of the end of isolation.

STEP NINE: *“Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.”*

A tranquil mind is the first requisite for good judgment. Good timing is important in making amends. What is courage? Prudence means taking calculated chances. Amends begin when we enter into recovery. Peace of mind cannot be bought at the expense of others. Need for discretion. Readiness to take consequences of our past and to take responsibility for well-being of others is spirit of Step Nine.

STEP TEN: *“Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.”*

Can we stay sober and keep emotional balance under all conditions? Self-searching becomes a regular habit. Admit, accept, and patiently correct defects. Emotional hangover. When past is settled with, present challenges can be met. Varieties of inventory. Anger, resentments, jealousy, envy, self-pity, hurt pride all led to the bottle. Self-restraint first objective. Insurance against “big-shot-ism.” Let’s look at credits as well as debits. Examination of motives.

STEP ELEVEN: *“Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood God, praying only for knowledge of God’s will for us and the power to carry that out.”*

Meditation and prayer main channels to Higher Power. Connection between self-examination and meditation and prayer. An unshakable foundation for life. How shall we meditate? Meditation has no boundaries. An individual adventure. First result is emotional balance. What about prayer? Daily petitions for understanding of God’s will and grace to carry it out. Actual results of prayer are beyond question. Rewards of meditation and prayer.

STEP TWELVE: *“Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to others who suffer from addictive, compulsive, and destructive behaviors and attitudes, and to practice these principles in all our activities.”*

Joy of living is the theme of the Twelfth Step. Action its keyword. Giving that asks no reward. Love that has no price tag. What is spiritual awakening? A new state of consciousness and being is received as a free gift. Readiness to receive gift lies in practice of Twelve Steps. The magnificent reality. Rewards of helping others who suffer from addictive, compulsive, and destructive behaviors and attitudes. Kinds of Twelfth Step work. Problems of Twelfth Step work. What about the practice of these principles in all our activities

The Promises, which follow Step Nine in the A.A. Big Book, are a critical resource in the recovery movement, and are distributed and often read at Step By Step meetings. In Step By Step, the Promises are often used as a text for preaching. They read as follows:

### **The Promises of Spiritual Recovery**

If we are painstaking about this phase of our development, we will be amazed before we are half way through. We are going to know a new freedom and a new happiness. We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it. We will comprehend the word serenity and we will know peace. No matter how far down the scale we have gone, we will see how our experience can benefit others. That feeling of uselessness and self-pity will disappear. We will lose interest in selfish things and gain interest in our fellows. Self-seeking will slip away. Our whole attitude and outlook upon life will change. Fear of people and of economic insecurity will leave us. We will intuitively know how to handle situations which used to baffle us. We will suddenly realize that God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves. Are these extravagant promises? We think not. They are being fulfilled among us—sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly. They will always materialize if we work for them.<sup>198</sup>

Following are the Twelve Steps of Spiritual Recovery of the Step By Step Recovery Ministry as adapted from A.A.'s Twelve Steps. Additions and departures from the A.A. original are noted in bold:

### **The Twelve Steps of Spiritual Recovery of the Step By Step Recovery Ministry**

13. We admitted we were powerless over **addictive, compulsive, and destructive behaviors, attitudes and relationships**—that our lives had become unmanageable.
14. **We** came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
15. **We** made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood **God**.
16. **We** made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
17. **We** admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
18. **We** were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
19. **We** humbly asked **God** to remove our shortcomings.
20. **We** made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

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<sup>198</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*, Third Edition (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1976), 83-84.

21. **We** made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
22. **We** continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
23. **We** sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood **God**, praying only for knowledge of **God**'s will for us and the power to carry that out.
24. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to **others who suffer from addictions, compulsions, and destructive behaviors, attitudes, and relationships** and to practice these principles in all our **activities**.

The Serenity Prayer, as discussed in Chapter Two, is another sacred text of Step By Step. It is another frequently cited text in sermons and is used, in its long form, in the Call to Worship and the hymn written for Step By Step, "God, Grant Us the Serenity." The short and long versions of the Serenity Prayer are as follows:

#### **The Serenity Prayer**

*(Original version by Reinhold Niebuhr, ca. 1926-32)*

God, give us grace to accept with serenity  
The things that cannot be changed,  
Courage to change the things  
Which should be changed,  
And the wisdom to distinguish  
The one from the other.  
Living one day at a time,  
Enjoying one moment at a time,  
Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,  
Taking, as Jesus did,  
This sinful world as it is,  
Not as I would have it,  
Trusting that You will make all things right,  
If I surrender to Your will,  
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life,  
And supremely happy with You forever in the next.  
Amen.<sup>199</sup>

#### **The Serenity Prayer**

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<sup>199</sup> *A.A. Grapevine* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1950).

*(Popular abridged version, also attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr)*

God, grant me the serenity  
to accept the things  
I cannot change,  
Courage to change the  
things I can, and the  
wisdom to know the difference.<sup>200</sup>

These constitute the primary sacred texts of the Step By Step Recovery Ministry. There are many other texts used as well from the rich literature of Twelve Step recovery. Much A.A. “conference-approved literature” is used in worship, including such works as *Living Sober*, *As Bill Sees It*, *The Language of the Heart*, *Came to Believe*, and the *Twenty-Four Hour Book*. The latter is one of many daily devotional guides for people in recovery whose selected scripture or other quotation and related meditation for a particular day has served as the source of inspiration for leaders of Step By Step. *Glad Day* is one such devotional designed specifically for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. *Letting God: Christian Meditations for Recovering People* is another good resource. The primary texts of Overeaters Anonymous, Debtors Anonymous, Sexual Compulsives Anonymous, and other Twelve Step fellowships, many publications including the useful Twelve Step workbooks from Hazleden are used in Step By Step, and finally, works by the writers Henri Nouwen, Frederick Buechner, Patrick Carnes, and John Bradshaw, to name but a few authors of inspirational works that have particularly strong meaning for people of faith in recovery.

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<sup>200</sup> Idem.

## The Use of Holy Scripture in Christian Recovery

*But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which God loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come God might show the immeasurable riches of God’s trace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.*  
—Ephesians 2:4-7

The theologian Karl Barth is reported to have recommended that modern preachers should prepare their sermons “with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.”<sup>201</sup> Similarly, a Twelve-Step-based Christian recovery ministry such as Step By Step must, as Barth suggests, hold the Bible in one hand and the Twelve Steps (and other recovery literature) in the other—keeping Holy Scripture and the literature of recovery in creative tension. Step By Step’s approach is articulated well in the devotional guide *The Twelve Steps for Christians*, which states:

“As Christians, we believe that God reveals much of his [sic] plan for each of us in the Holy Scriptures. Both mature Christians and those who are just being awakened to a personal relationship with Christ can find tremendous value in the Twelve Steps. By regularly applying them to the events of one’s life, the steps become a means for enriching one’s relationship with God. The steps are especially powerful when used together with the regular Christian practices of prayer, meditation, and Bible study.”<sup>202</sup>

Not only is the revealed Word of God as delivered in Holy Scripture is foundational to a recovery ministry, but so can be noncanonical wisdom including, but not limited to, Apocryphal and extracanonical scriptures, the *Talmud*, *Midrash*, and other rabbinical writings, the *Koran*, insights from other religious traditions, and modern

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<sup>201</sup> There is apparently no reference for this precise statement in Barth’s work. In “Curriculum for a Time Such as This,” Elizabeth F. Caldwell writes that the quotation “has been inferred from the writing of Karl Barth, [that] we should teach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.” Using the News to Teach Religion, An Example from a Theological Seminary, Religion & Ethics Newsweekly website, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/teach/example-caldwell.html>. Accessed 1/27/07.

<sup>202</sup> Friends in Recovery, *The Twelve Steps for Christians: Based on Biblical Teachings*, Rev. ed. (Curtis, WA: RPI Publishing, 1994), xxvi.

wisdom from recovery literature and modern writers, preachers, and teachers. The contributions of the arts of worship, explored further in Chapter Four, “Bringing Twelve Step Recovery and Christian Practice Together through the Arts of Worship,” are also of invaluable and incalculable benefit.

### **Alcoholism and Addiction in Scripture**

There are numerous references to the drinking of alcohol, and particularly to drunkenness, in the Bible, and the condition appears to have been common among the people of Israel as it appears in a number of instances in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. In Genesis 9:20-27, Noah discovers wine, and subsequently drunkenness, and while drunk uncharacteristically exposes himself to his son Ham—an act that was considered an abomination—and therefore leading him to place a curse upon Ham’s line (and his son Canaan and all the Canaanites). Proverbs 23:31-35 offers a warning against wine, describing how: “it sparkles in the cup and goes down smoothly. At the last it bites like a serpent, and stings like an adder. Your eyes will see strange things, and your mind utter perverse things. You will be like one who lies down in the middle of the sea, like one who lies on top of the mast. ‘They struck me,’ you will say, ‘but I was not hurt; they beat me, but I did not feel it. When shall I awake? I will seek another drink.’” And in Ephesians 5:18 is the warning: “Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit.”<sup>203</sup>

In Romans 13:12b-14, Paul instructs the church to “lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling

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<sup>203</sup> References obtained in entry on “Drunkenness” in McKenzie, John L., *Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), p 205-206.

and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.” *The Oxford Annotated Bible* interprets this as meaning “to put on the Lord Jesus Christ is to enter fully into the new order of existence which God has created through Christ.”<sup>204</sup> Paul’s letter to the Ephesians (4:22-24) instructs its readers that “You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” And in his letter to the believers in Rome, Paul writes that “Those whose lives are according to the flesh think about the things of the flesh, but those whose lives are according to the Spirit, about the things of the Spirit” (Rom 8:5).

Dick B., a historian of Alcoholics Anonymous., notes the emphasis Bill Wilson placed on Bible study for recovering alcoholics in the A.A. program, “stating that the Book of James, 1 Corinthians 13, and Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5 to 7) were considered absolutely essential in the early spiritual recovery program. Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob both said that the Sermon on the Mount contained the underlying philosophy of A.A.”<sup>205</sup>

Each Step By Step recovery worship service is jointly rooted in Holy Scripture and the Twelve Steps. It has been suggested that all religion is about recovery, and the Judeo-Christian tradition certainly focuses on themes of recovery. Therefore, it is not difficult to find texts that illustrate recovery themes, using only a little imagination. Our

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<sup>204</sup> *The Oxford Annotated Bible*, Revised Standard Version, Herbert G. May and Bruce G. Metzger, Editors (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 1376 fn. See also Rom 6:1-14 notes.

<sup>205</sup> Dick B., “Rev. Sam Shoemaker, an A.A.’Co-Founder” and Spiritual Source,” <http://www.mental-health-matters.com>, March 2002.

experience over the past seven years of Step By Step worship has demonstrated that it is quite possible to follow the Revised Common Lectionary texts for a week and find in one or more passage a meaningful correlation with the Step or recovery theme of the month, so “preaching from the lectionary” is a valid option for a Christian recovery ministry. The cycle of the liturgical calendar lends itself well to the rhythm of working through the Steps. Issues and emotions brought up by Christian holidays and festivals can be addressed using the biblical stories of those events at the same time their qualities as “triggers” for addictive and compulsive behaviors can be explored.

In the New Testament, some particularly rich resources are found in each of the Gospels but especially the Sermon on the Mount and, within it, the Beatitudes. Almost any of the parables of Jesus’ miracles of healing are applicable to recovery, from the story of the demoniac to the hemorrhagic woman to the man commanded by Jesus to get up and walk to the well after thirty-eight years of disability, to the raising of Lazarus from the dead (the latter is a personal favorite when I am asked to suggest a scripture passage by a first-time Step By Step preacher). The many accounts of Jesus’ solidarity with the marginalized—people stigmatized or outcast from his community of origin—provide rich associations with the experience of many struggling with addictions and compulsions that have placed them on the outside, on the margins of society. Paul provides a wealth of recovery themes, particularly in Galatians and First Corinthians. The Letters of James and Peter, and the Book of Revelation, among many others, offer tremendous insights.

In the Hebrew Bible, Isaiah, the Psalms, Lamentations, the Book of Job, and Proverbs are rich in recovery themes. Truly, it is very nearly possible to open the Bible



at random and find on virtually every page a passage that reinforces one or more themes of the experience of enslavement to addiction or, conversely freedom—and responsibility—in recovery, when recovery is understood as being in right relation to God and in Christ.

Also useful are the books of the Apocrypha (such as 1 Esdras 3:18-24) and extracanonical texts such as the Gospel of Mary (explored later in this chapter) and related Gnostic sources such as the Valentinian Meditation on the Gospel, which contains this pertinent “Similitude of Drunkenness”:

“He is wont to understand as one who, having been drunk has returned from his drunkenness, having returned to be himself alone: he has set on their feet the things that are his own. He has caused many to turn back from Planē, he has gone on before them to their places out of which they had proceeded.”<sup>206</sup>

“He has returned from his drunkenness... returned to be himself...set on their feet the things that are his own.” Such a rich text begs to be the subject of a substantial Bible study or powerful sermon on recovery with widely accessible themes.

These are but a handful of examples of the breadth and depth of recovery themes in sacred literature. However, it is not the purpose of this project to develop a comprehensive resource of biblical citations linked to recovery themes. Much excellent work has been done in a number of recovery-oriented versions of the Bible, of which three good examples are *Serenity: A Companion for Christian Recovery*, a version of the New Testament, Psalms, and Proverbs using the New King James Version of the Bible with highlighted scripture passages relevant to particular Steps. Another resource is *The*

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<sup>206</sup> Kendrick Grobel, *The Gospel of Truth: A Valentinian Meditation on the Gospel*, translated from the Coptic with Commentary by Grobel (New York: Abingdon, 1960), 78.

*Twelve Steps for Christians*, which provides selected scriptures and related meditations for each of the Twelve Steps using the New International Version of the Bible, and also provides cross-references to a third resource, *The Life Recovery Bible*, the most comprehensive of these three. It uses the New Living Translation and provides a full text of both Testaments with highlighted text and marginal notes throughout connecting particular pericopes to different Steps. *The Life Recovery Bible* also intersperses more detailed pages of reflections on the Steps in connection with Bible passages. The advantages and limitations of each of the translations used for these resources is ripe fodder for a different discussion.

In addition, Dick B. has connected many passages in the A.A. Big Book with scriptural references in the Bible (King James Version) in *The Good Book and The Big Book: A.A.'s Roots in the Bible*,<sup>207</sup> and this provides another useful reference for the Barthian practice of “holding the Bible in one hand and recovery literature in the other.” In Step By Step, we use these and other resources but tend to rely on the New Revised Standard Version translation (and, on occasion, *The Message* by Eugene Peterson) for its inclusive language and superior scholarship in making its translation. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, using the NRSV, is another regular source for Step By Step.

The Hobe Sound, Florida, chapter of the national Christian recovery fellowship Overcomers Outreach<sup>208</sup> connects what it identifies as the key theological tenets of Christian recovery with specific scriptural references.<sup>209</sup> The list includes the following:

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<sup>207</sup> Dick B., *The Good Book and The Big Book: A.A.'s Roots in the Bible* (Kihei, Hawaii: Paradise Research Publications, 1997), 180-188.

<sup>208</sup> The Mission Statement of Overcomers Outreach is as follows: “Overcomers Outreach is a ministry that was born out of a deep need of a support system for individuals and families within evangelical Christian churches. Overcomers Outreach support groups use the Bible and the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous to minister to individuals who are affected by alcohol, mind altering drugs, sexual

- Recovery is truly Christian only if God is part of it. This God is not just a nebulous “Higher Power”, but rather is the Creator of the Universe, who has revealed Himself in the Bible. His is the “Highest Power.” Additionally, this God is a loving God, who showed His love by sending His Son, Jesus Christ, into this fallen world to save us. (John 3: 16) *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”*
- The Word of God is the authoritative rule and guide of our recovery. We believe there is, indeed, some objective truth in this world and that it is revealed in the Holy Scriptures. (Hebrews 4: 12) *“Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”*
- There is a real devil. He is a real living being, who through the power of deception, is fighting for the minds of men. Truth is therefore the ultimate weapon in the Spiritual Warfare of Christian recovery. (John 8: 31-32) *“Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, ‘If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.’”*
- Sin is deceptive, powerful and addictive. As Christian author Keith Miller states, sin (or the “control disease”) is the root of all addictions and compulsive disorders. (Romans 7: 15-25) *“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin.”*
- There is a Redeemer. Jesus Christ has won the Victory over Sin, Death, and the devil by His death on the cross. (1 John 3: 8b) *“Everyone who commits sin is a child of the devil; for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil.”*

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addiction, gambling, food and other compulsive behaviors or dependencies. Family members are welcome at our meetings. The message is based on the Bible and the ministry is motivated by the love of God. Overcomers mission is to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to the hurting, and meet human needs in His name without discrimination. Overcomers Outreach is a bridge between the church and the Traditional 12 Step programs.”

For more information about this fellowship and its Twelve-Step Christian support groups, visit <http://www.overcomersoutreach.org/>.

<sup>209</sup> “Theology of Christian Recovery: Distinctive Fundamentals,” Grace Fellowship Recovery Church, Home of the Overcomers of Hobe Sound, Florida, <http://www.recoverychurch.com>. Accessed 4/25/2005. Scripture citations added by the author and are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

- Therefore, the message of the Gospel brings forgiveness and the power to experience real change in our lives through God's Power.  
(Romans 1: 16) *"For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."*
- This is a fallen world. Not only are external things warped, perverse, confused, and corrupt, believers in recovery must still contend with their own fallen natures, as well.  
(Romans 7: 21) *"So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand."*
- All human beings need spiritual rebirth. Because spiritual death is a reality, we must assume that everyone needs to experience new life from God.  
(John 3:3) *"Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.'"*
- There is a significant difference between guilt and "toxic shame." Guilt is a response of the conscience to specific sinful actions. On the other hand, destructive (or "toxic") shame is an inner sense of being unlovable, unredeemable, hopeless, irreparably flawed, incomplete, and worthless. Everyone who struggles with a compulsive disorder experiences this to some degree. The Gospel provides the answer for both of these dilemmas. Confession and forgiveness are God's way to overcome guilt. And, growing in relationship to Him and other healthy people enables us to accept ourselves as loved and lovable.  
(1 John-4:9) *"God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him."*
- There is a definite difference between the terms "drunkard" and "alcoholic." According to the Bible, drunkenness is a moral condition. On the other hand, alcoholism is a therapeutic condition. What separates the addict from the non-addict is not how often they drink, or how much they drink, but what happens when they do drink—the loss of control (or powerlessness). Once an individual becomes addicted, he can never be a social drinker.  
(Ephesians 5: 18) *"Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit."*
- God works in processes. "Recovery" is not a one time, once-and-for-all thing—it is a process.  
(Romans 12: 2) *"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect."*
- Recovery is not just "fixing" ourselves, but rather it is gaining the "tools" to succeed in working out what God has already put within (Sanctification).  
(Philippians 2: 12-13) *"Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure."*
- God works through His Spirit. The Greek word "*paraclete*" is used in the Scriptures to refer to the Holy Spirit. This term means "counselor" or "personal tutor." To succeed in recovery, believers must learn to respond to God's Spirit and walk in His will for their lives. (John 16: 13-15) *"When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you."*

- God works through people. There is no more isolated and lonely person than the addict. John Bradshaw says: “the deepest wound of toxic shame is the inability to develop meaningful, intimate, human relations.” The message of Christian Recovery is that God’s Grace is experienced as a process which involves intensely honest and nurturing relationships with other people. They serve as agents of His grace to unravel our woundedness and reshape our thinking. (Hebrews 10: 23-25) *“Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”*
- Christian Recovery is “intensive discipleship.” “Putting the cork in the bottle” (not using drugs or alcohol) is no guarantee of any lasting change in an individual’s life. What addicts need is a systematic commitment to an ongoing process of personal growth. Christian Recovery means gaining new tools that enable us to live a new sober life and to remove all the “stumbling blocks” to a life of Christian Victory. (2 Peter 1: 5-11) *“For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For anyone who lacks these things is short-sighted and blind, and is forgetful of the cleansing of past sins. Therefore, brothers and sisters, be all the more eager to confirm your call and election, for if you do this, you will never stumble. For in this way, entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ will be richly provided for you.”*
- We might also consider “Recovery” as another word for what the Bible refers to as “Sanctification”.
- Repentance is more than simply confessing our sins to God. We all must own up to our own sin if we are to experience forgiveness. (1 John 1: 9) *“If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”* Still an additional step is necessary: Repentance. The Greek word for repentance is “metanoia” which implies a complete “change of mind”. New thinking comes from new attitudes of the heart that have been formed by new perspectives. (Acts 3: 19) *“Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out.”*
- “Rigorous honesty” is essential for true spirituality. Jesus declares that the Truth will set us free. (John 8: 32) *“So, we must make a commitment to ‘walk in the light.’”* (1 John 1: 5-9) *“This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”*
- There is a “therapeutic value” to talk. Self-revelation in a safe environment is a tremendously healing experience. Support groups provide an environment that promotes this process. (James 5: 16) *“Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.”*
- “Grace flows freely through unclogged conduits.” Christian workers cannot bring people to a place they have not come to themselves. Therefore, if we want to reach out to hurting

people, we must be in the process of dealing with our own issues first. (1 Corinthians 11: 31) *“But if we judged ourselves, we would not be judged.”* (2 Corinthians 4: 1-2) *“Therefore, since it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God’s word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God.”*

While this list is long, it spells out quite vividly a particular theology of Christian recovery. In reviewing this list, it would seem that some of these citations are far more particular to issues of addiction and recovery than others, which pertain more to human frailty and discipleship in general—and which therefore require careful and creative exegesis on the part of the preacher or leader of Bible study to illuminate and directly make the connections between a passage and the process of working the Twelve Steps in a program of recovery. The same can be said for many of the citations provided in the recovery Bibles mentioned above. Unquestionably, a truly comprehensive list of all “recovery-related” passages in Holy Scripture would be extensive indeed.

### **A.A. and the “Disease Model” of Addiction**

In A.A., a central focus of the program of recovery is acceptance by the alcoholic that he or she has the *disease* of alcoholism, and that it is incurable, but that a “one-day reprieve,” one day at a time, from the disease is possible through surrender of one’s self-will to the Higher Power and active participation in the Program of Alcoholics Anonymous (which rests on a trinity of tenets—“recovery, unity, service”). “We learned that we had to fully concede to our innermost selves that we were alcoholics. This is the first step in recovery. The delusion that we are like other people, or presently may be, has to be smashed.” The A.A. “Big Book” explains that:

“The alcoholic at certain times has no effective mental defense against the first drink. Except in a few cases, neither he [sic] nor any other human being can provide such a

defense. His defense must come from a Higher Power.”<sup>210</sup> “[We] must walk day by day in the path of spiritual progress. If [we] persist, remarkable things will happen. When we look back, we realize that the things which came to us when we put ourselves in God’s hands were better than anything we could have planned. Follow the dictates of a Higher Power and you will presently live in a new and wonderful world, no matter what your present circumstances!”<sup>211</sup>

For alcoholics in the 1930s, the alternative to sobriety too often was grim: death, imprisonment, or insanity. Nothing, therefore, could be more important in the lives of recovering alcoholics than maintaining their sobriety. The view that alcoholism was not simply another of humanity’s many sins but rather a disease was critical, and which will be explored later in this paper regarding the undercurrent within recovery theology of the theology of liberation. Much of the credit for the popularization of the disease model is given to a physician and early A.A. advocate, Dr. William Duncan Silkworth, who treated over 50,000 alcoholics in his lifetime. He was convinced that “alcoholism is not just a vice or habit. This is a compulsion, this is pathological craving, this is disease... an obsession of the mind that condemns one to drink and an allergy of the body that condemns one to die.”<sup>212</sup>

G. Douglas Talbott describes the role of the psychological syndrome of compulsion in addiction, stating that “despite all judgment, reason, insight or consequence, the addicted individual continues to use . . . substance[s] compulsively.”<sup>213</sup> Kay Sheppard, an authority on food addiction, emphasizes that “addicts are not weak-

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<sup>210</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid, 100.

<sup>212</sup> Silkworth, William, cited in “The Little Doctor Who Loved Drunks,” *A.A. Grapevine*, 7:12, May 1951, 7; “A Doctor’s Opinion,” *Alcoholics Anonymous*, xxvii.

<sup>213</sup> Talbott, G. Douglass, quoted in Kay Sheppard, *Food Addiction: The Body Knows*, Revised and Expanded Edition (Deerfield Beach, Florida: Health Communications, 1993), 3

willed or immoral nor do they have a bad habit or behavioral problem. Rather they have a metabolic, biochemical imbalance which results in the characteristic symptoms of addiction.” Sheppard adds that:

“addiction is a chronic, progressive and ultimately fatal disease. It is chronic because the condition never goes away, progressive because the symptoms always get worse over time and fatal because those who persist in the disease will die an early death due to its complications. There are symptoms, which are present in all addictions. It is by these indicators that we are able to recognize addictive diseases. The signs of addiction are obsession, compulsion, denial, tolerance, withdrawal syndrome, and craving.”<sup>214</sup>

Psychotherapist and alcoholism specialist Philip J. Flores’ extensive review of clinical research and literature leaves little doubt of the validity of the disease model for alcoholism. While embracing the disease model, Flores notes that highly qualified researchers have for years been unable to determine whether alcoholism is a physical or mental problem, noting that “the outstanding specialists in the field,” such as Ruth Fox, E. M. Jellinek, and Marty Mann, “have all realized that alcoholism embraces cultural, psychological, and physical factors.”<sup>215</sup>

Flores reports the differing criteria for defining alcoholism and alcohol dependence by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) and Alcoholics Anonymous. Although the APA does not list alcoholism as a mental disorder (disease), it does equate alcoholism with alcohol dependence. The diagnosis of alcohol dependence using DSM-III criteria requires the following: “(a) either a pattern of pathological alcohol use or impairment in social or occupational functioning due to alcohol use, and (b) either tolerance or withdrawal. The distinction between alcoholism and alcohol abuse boils to

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<sup>214</sup> Sheppard, Kay, *Food Addiction*, 3.

<sup>215</sup> Philip J. Flores, *Group Psychotherapy with Addicted Populations: An Integration of Twelve-Step and Psychodynamic Theory*, Second Edition (New York: Haworth Press, 1997), 284.



down to whether one finds tolerance or withdrawal.”<sup>216</sup> In A.A., members self-diagnose their own alcoholism: a person is alcoholic if s/he identifies her/himself as being so.

Flores cites J. Wallace’s evidence for the value of such self-diagnosis for alcoholics, showing that “it (1) helps explain the past in a way that gives hope for the future; (2) allows alcoholics and addicts to cope with their guilt, anxiety, remorse, and confusion; and (3) provides them with a specific behavior—staying sober or clean and working the twelve steps of the program—that will change their lives in a desired direction.” Flores further observes that “alcoholics or addicts have a lifetime of sobriety in which to recognize the fact that not all of their personal and social difficulties are the result of their addiction. But they can come to this realization after they have gotten the alcohol and drugs out of their system and have steered their lives in the desired direction.”<sup>217</sup>

Wallace also sees “the ideological base of A.A. providing a crucial component in the alcoholic’s and addict’s recovery process. . . . the alcoholic and addict need A.A.’s somewhat biased view of reality. ‘The alcoholic can ill afford the dispassionate, disinterested, and indeed almost casual play upon words and ideas of the inquiring academic intellectual.’” Wallace strongly feels that the “chemically dependent individual recognizes intuitively the need for a stable and enduring belief system if he or she is to stay sober and clean” and believes it is no wonder that “sober alcoholics cling to their belief systems like drowning poets to their metaphors in a sea of confusion?”<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid, 22-23.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid, 22.

Flores also shares Martin Buber's insight that "persons in crisis need direction; it is only after sobriety has been maintained that they can start to investigate some of the deeper psychological issues in their lives."<sup>219</sup> Flores provides confirmation of these insights with reports of:

"neuropsychological research [of the 1990s that] has shed some light on the importance of providing alcoholics and addicts with a clear, structured program that they must follow during their first months of abstinence. [The New York State Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services, OASAS, affirmed the validity of this approach in its recommended guidelines for treatment of chemical abuse and dependence in 2002.<sup>220</sup>] New members of twelve-step programs are told not to make any major decisions during the first year of recovery. They are instructed not to analyze the program. They are told, 'The program works because it works! Go to ninety meetings in ninety days! Take the body and the mind will follow!' Each of these suggestions is based on AA's and other twelve-step programs' intuitive understanding that alcoholics and addicts, during the early stages of abstinence, are incapable of thinking clearly and do not possess the intellectual capabilities necessary for rational, intelligent decisions. The program provides them with twelve clear steps that they must follow."<sup>221</sup>

Flores reports that "neuropsychological tests sensitive to abstract reasoning, flexible thinking, fluid intelligence, and new learning, reveal alcoholics and addicts consistently scoring in the brain-impaired range" with "verbal intelligence and old learning" remain[ing] largely intact. . . such that alcoholics "often appear unimpaired to the unsuspecting observer. Their level of impairment is usually not permanent and does not involve cortical structural damage" but instead is "brain dysfunction. . . of a diffuse nature, usually the result of an alcohol-induced encephalopathy exacerbated by nutritional and vitamin deficiencies." This is not to discount such alcohol-induced

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<sup>219</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>220</sup> "What is Addiction Treatment?" New York State Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services, William A. Gorman, Commissioner, Albany, New York: 2002), 3-7.

<sup>221</sup> Flores, 23.

neurological conditions as Wernicke-Korsakoff syndrome, alcoholic encephalopathy, and alcohol induced dementia, and premature aging.<sup>222</sup>

However, most alcoholics and addicts experience “spontaneous recovery” from the loss of cortical functioning if they remain alcohol- and drug-free and improve their vitamin and nutritional intake,” with “gradual and steady” recovery of cognitive functioning. The greatest improvement is usually experienced in the first months with total recovery achieved after one to two years of abstinence. Flores concludes that “considering the implications of this research, the structure and direction that AA and other twelve-step programs provide at the beginning of . . . recovery are vital.”<sup>223</sup>

Flores affirms that “the term ‘alcoholic’ signifies everything (self-centered behavior, negative attitude, corrupt values) that sober A.A. members must guard against if they are to maintain a healthy sobriety.” It evokes far more than a damaged neuropsychological system or a compromised liver. “By constantly utilizing the self-definition of alcoholic, A.A. members automatically imply the opposite, which is everything a healthy, recovering, and sober member of A.A. must attain. A.A. members are thus reminded with each pronouncement of themselves as an alcoholic that they are just a drink away from losing what they have become, which is a person whose values, attitudes, and behavior [are] the direct opposite of that of an [active] alcoholic.”<sup>224</sup>

There is considerable support both within the recovery movement and outside for the critical importance, for addicts, of accepting the diagnosis of addiction at face value. A December 2006 *New York Times* article by Sally Patel headlined “Sometimes, the Why

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid, 312.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid,p22-23.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid, 286.

Isn't Really Crucial" discounts the "grail-like search for insight" into the causes of addiction may "backfire when it becomes a way for patients to avoid the hard work of change." Dr. Patel, who is a staff psychiatrist at the Oasis Drug Treatment Clinic, notes that "the premise... that a person can reliably identify the psychic roots of an addiction—or any other act of self sabotage—is highly overrated." Nothing that "insight has no guaranteed relationship to change.... It is time," Patel states, "to retire the myth that insight is a prerequisite for change." Self-exploration, she notes, "is an effort often fraught with distortion and even hazard, when it prevents one from making the changes that need to be made in the present."<sup>225</sup> This insight from modern addiction rehabilitation therapy echoes a time-honored A.A. maxim, "utilize, don't analyze." Mark, an alcoholic who writes the "A Dozen Steps" blog, explains the concept well (*italics added*):

"I'm an alcoholic. One of my character defects is perfectionism. I have a tendency to over-analyze while I seek perfection. The [A.A.] oldtimers recognized it. They had had it, knew it and made it known to me, thankfully. Then they told me to *utilize, not analyze*. It was very much along the lines, for me, of intellectualizing myself right into my next drink, complicating boiling water, well, you get the idea."<sup>226</sup>

New evidence of the neurological and physical basis of addiction is continually being added to the literature. A January 2007 *Times* article, reporting a new study

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<sup>225</sup> Sally Satel, M.D., "Sometimes, the Why Isn't Really Crucial, *The New York Times*, Health and Fitness, December 19, 2006, F5.

<sup>226</sup> Mark, "Utilize, Don't Analyze," *A Dozen Steps* weblog, <http://www.adozensteps.com/utilize-dont-analyze/>. Posted July 28, 2006. Accessed 11/10/06. This oft-cited maxim, heard repeatedly in A.A. meetings, has an uncertain provenance in A.A. or other recovery literature, although it is said to have been printed in an early A.A. pamphlet, according to a report given to me by an A.A. member at the Carlyle Group of A.A. in New York City, 1991, but which I have been unable to verify. Another citation is found in "Helpful Thoughts," Central Ohio Group Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous [http://www.aacentralohio.org/COGF\\_about\\_aa.htm](http://www.aacentralohio.org/COGF_about_aa.htm). Accessed 1/26/07.

published in *Science*, highlighted a new finding that disabling a section of the brain can eliminate the craving for nicotine among smokers who have great difficulty quitting smoking. In a study of stroke patients, scientists discovered that “an injury to a specific part of the brain, near the ear, can instantly and permanently break a smoking habit. People with the injury who stopped smoking found that their bodies, as one man put it, ‘forgot the urge to smoke.’” The *Times* reporter notes that “the finding suggests that therapies might focus on the insula, a prune-size region under the frontal lobes that is thought to register gut feelings and is apparently a critical part of the network that sustains addictive behavior.... [Although] the study did not examine dependence on alcohol, cocaine or other substances.... smoking is at least as hard to quit as any other habit, and it probably involves the same brain circuits, experts said.”<sup>227</sup>

## **Sin and Addiction**

Despite this compelling amount of physical and psychological evidence for an understanding of alcoholism and addiction as a disease, there remains considerable controversy concerning the validity of the disease model. One argument is presented by theologian Linda Mercadante, who notes “the specific focus on addiction as physical has both advantages and problems for theology. One advantage is that the physical emphasis seems to describe in a graphic way what earlier thinkers called the ‘bondage of the will.’ This is the feeling the apostle Paul describes in Romans 7:19 when he says, ‘I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.’”

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<sup>227</sup> Benedict Carey, “In Clue to Addiction, Brain Injury Halts Smoking,” *The New York Times*, January 26, 2007, 1.

Mercadante believes that even A.A. “wavers on whether this bondage is preventable. Within Christian tradition, however, there is insistence that the bondage is self-imposed at a certain early point, both historically and personally. This. . . preserves human freedom to turn away, even in the face of God’s sovereign love. Both A.A. and Christianity. . . agree that once the path away from God is traveled for a time, there is no turning back, short of the intervening power of divine grace. One is habituated into sinning; the longer it is practiced, the more a bondage it becomes.”<sup>228</sup>

C. Roy Woodruff cites Edgar Y. Mullins’ observation that sin is humanity’s “breach of a covenant relationship with God. This rupture also involves [humankind’s] relationship with [humanity.]” Woodruff goes on to note that “sin is idolatry, falsehood, injustice, and guile.”<sup>229</sup> Making alcohol one’s God is idolatry—and therefore is sin, as is putting anything ahead of God—whether it be food, money, sex, prestige, or an addiction substance or behavior.

Grace M. Jantzen defines idolatry as “the worship of anything that is not God.... to identify something as an idol.... There is, within Christianity, also an idea of ‘spiritual’ idolatry, that is, giving to something other than God, such as money, power, or knowledge, the central place in one’s life, constructing these things in the place of God.”<sup>230</sup> Added to this list of course we would add alcohol or other substances or behaviors that become like gods for addicts on their “low-level quest” for a spiritual

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<sup>228</sup> Mercadante, Linda, *Victims and Sinners*, 115.

<sup>229</sup> C. Roy Woodruff, *Alcoholism and Christian Experience* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968), 59, citing Edgar Y. Mullins, *The Christian Religion in Its Doctrinal Expression* (Judson Press, 1917), 289.

<sup>230</sup> Grace M. Jantzen, “Idolatry,” *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, 148-149.

connection who only succeed in worshipping false idols and numbing any genuine spiritual feelings they may experience.

These observations beg the question of where personal responsibility figures into the disease equation of addiction. If we accept that we have the disease of addiction, that this is our weakness, that it is “similar to other chronic medical conditions such as hypertension, diabetes, and asthma,”<sup>231</sup> then isn’t our lack of control over the symptoms of the disease—our powerlessness—not a sin? And if our powerlessness leads to regrettable or even reprehensible actions, are we not responsible? Twelve Step recovery says yes. The process of taking a searching and fearless, rigorous and soul-searching moral inventory in Step Four, and making amends to all those we had harmed in Step Eight make the ethic of personal responsibility for alcoholics and addicts very clear. The alcoholic who kills another driver or pedestrian while driving drunk in a blackout may be able to use the alcoholism defense to avoid prison time, but within the fellowship of Twelve Step recovery, that person’s absolute responsibility is very clear. The “disease” may have had him under its influence when the car he was driving killed that family. He is still responsible for making amends in whatever way he and society deem appropriate.

Few addicts started off already addicted. Every alcoholic had to take a first drink at some point. If we’re crack babies, or children or underage minors who are taught to drink by parents or friends, then our own agency is eliminated or mitigated, but most alcoholics began drinking of their own free will and at some point “crossed the line” to active alcoholism. Therefore, it could be argued that the agency of deciding to drink in the first place, not knowing whether or not one will turn out to be an alcoholic with all its

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<sup>231</sup> New York State Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services (OASAS), “What is Addiction Treatment?” Albany, NY: OASAS, July 2002, 3.

potentially negative effects, is sinful, if drinking in the first place regardless of the outcome is considered a sin.

In 1956, a survey conducted at Yale University by Howard J. Clinebell among 146 Protestant clergy revealed a prevalent belief that “alcoholism begins as a personal sin and ends as a sickness. One who drinks exposes himself to the danger of becoming an alcoholic. Once the drinking has passed a certain point it is out of volitional control and becomes a sickness. [The alcoholic] ... is responsible for having caught the compulsion or illness.”<sup>232</sup> While attitudes among clergy have evolved over the succeeding half century, this view of the sinful nature of alcohol use and by extension alcoholism continues to be held by many, including important segments of the evangelical movement.

Writing in 2006, the Rev. Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention, affirmed his denomination’s stand on the sinfulness of alcohol consumption, stating that:

“While the Bible may be subject to various interpretations concerning alcohol consumption (as well as the nature of the beverage consumed), Southern Baptists’ understanding of the issue has been exceedingly unambiguous.... [calling] their brothers and sisters to live ‘an exemplary Christian lifestyle of abstinence from beverage alcohol and all other harmful drugs’ (1984); to recognize alcohol as ‘America’s number one drug problem’ (1982); to ‘reaffirm our historic position as opposing alcohol as a beverage’ (1978); to view ‘personal abstinence’ as the ‘Christian way’ (1957); to express their ‘unceasing opposition to the manufacture, sale and use of alcoholic beverages’ (1955); to realize alcohol is a ‘habit-forming and destructive poison’ (1940) and the ‘chief source of vice, crime, poverty and degradation’ (1936); and to ‘reassert our truceless and uncompromising hostility to the manufacture, sale, importation and transportation of alcoholic beverages’ (1896).... Though nowhere in Scripture will you find it written that alcohol consumption itself is a sin, you do find clear and dire warnings about its use and abuse.”<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>232</sup> Howard J. Clinebell, Jr., *Understanding and Counselling the Alcoholic through Religion and Psychology* (Nashville: Abington Press, 1956), 157-62. Also cited by E.M. Jellinek, *The Disease Concept of Alcoholism* (New Haven, College and University Press, 1960), 49

<sup>233</sup> Richard Land, “The Great Alcohol Debate,” For Faith and Family/Archive, <http://faithandfamily.com/fff/archive/author/RichardLand>. Accessed 12/21/06.



Land cites an earlier Southern Baptist leader, Foy Valentine's statement that "since Noah first grew grapes, made wine, passed out, and brought shame to himself and his family, the human race has been grappling with the moral dimension of the alcohol problem." Land goes on to observe that "we often abuse the liberty we have in Christ. We mistake it for license to engage, under Christ's covering, in any behavior. We know the Apostle Paul likewise wrestled, as he wrote, 'For I do not do the good that I want to do, but I practice the evil that I do not want to do' (Romans 7:19)." He adds: "Even those of us who are washed in the blood of Christ still struggle with our sin nature, which pulls us to do, to think and even to say things we know do not honor our Lord."<sup>234</sup>

Land leaves little room for prevarication about what he and his denomination—as representative of the evangelical viewpoint—believe about this form of temptation, asking:

"does the Holy Spirit desire for us to engage in behavior—sinful or not—that could draw another away from Christ? Of course not. It is on that scriptural basis—among others—that I contend the Bible does have something to say about the consumption of beverage alcohol and other behaviors not specifically addressed."<sup>235</sup>

Here Land uses a scriptural reference whose message few could dispute, quoting Romans 8:6, "The mind-set of the Spirit is life and peace." His interpretation that follows, however, uses Paul's message to reinforce a call to total abstinence, stating, "I don't believe there is a need for a foreign substance to achieve peace or relaxation, or whatever state some assert the moderate use of alcohol produces. Can a mind, altered by the consumption of alcohol, also be under the control of the Holy Spirit? We are to be

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

<sup>235</sup> Idem.

transformed people, offering our ‘bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.’ This is our ‘spiritual worship,’ Paul writes in Romans 12:1-2.”

Land again interprets Paul’s message again into a message about abstinence: “Alcohol, along with many other things, corrupts our body, and we are not then in control of it to offer it to God—‘holy and pleasing.’ While alcohol use can be a stumbling block to the lost, more than that, a mind diminished by alcohol can miss a divinely ordained opportunity to share the hope that is in Christ.”<sup>236</sup>

Land concludes by quoting Foy Valentine again: “Alcohol’s drugging, depressing effect reduces mental capacity and thereby deadens moral sensitivity.” He then adds his own coda: “I have enough things in my life that distract me from my calling. I can’t imagine intentionally ingesting a substance that will impair my judgment and further distract me from God’s will for my life.”<sup>237</sup>

This is as clear an equation of any form of alcohol or substance use with fallenness and sin as one could hope to hear. It leaves little room for ambiguity and no room for the disease theory of alcoholism. Not only is drinking “a stumbling block to the lost”—namely, true alcoholics—but it is at best a “distraction” from God’s will for our lives and at worst a missed “opportunity to share the hope that is in Christ.”

To conclude this exploration of addiction and sin, a John Ford explains the issue of responsibility in this way: “although the alcoholic may be powerless over alcohol, and unable at times directly to resist the craving for drink, yet is within his power, generally speaking, to do something about his drinking. He is therefore responsible for taking the

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<sup>236</sup> Idem.

<sup>237</sup> Idem.

necessary means to get over his addiction.”<sup>238</sup> However, many in recovery would contend that in order to take that first step to “do something” about our drinking requires Grace, the intervention of a power greater than ourselves, in our lives, to give us the faith and willingness to have the courage to “do something.”

Theologian Christopher Morse has an understanding of sin that seems to reconcile well with recovery theology (as explored in Chapter Two), explaining that sin is revealed in contrast to God’s grace. “Only God’s being for us shows the extent of our being against whom God is for.... The New Testament confession that ‘we were dead’ comes only, if should be noted, from those who confess to having been made alive in relation to what happens with Jesus. Faith in keeping with such testimony, far from identifying the awareness of sin with a masochistic preoccupation with guilt, refuses to belief that there is any true sense of sin that is not the sense of sin forgiven.... The only sin we actually now is the opposition that is overcome by God’s being for us.”<sup>239</sup>

### **Sin, Addiction, Recovery, and the Imperative for Justice**

A different and highly pertinent view of sin is that the greatest sin against God’s creation and God’s beloved children is through injustice. Theologian Walter J. Burghardt, in *Justice: A Global Adventure*, reflects upon the biblical imperative for justice and modern-day responses to that imperative. His insights resonate for the Step By Step Recovery Ministry in a number of ways. Burghardt explores the selection of the people of Israel in the First Testament as God’s Chosen: “Why this particular body of

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<sup>238</sup> Father John Ford, cited in Jellinek, *The Disease Concept of Alcoholism*, 51.

<sup>239</sup> Christopher Morse, *Not Every Spirit*, 238.

men and women? Not because they deserved it; simply God's mysterious love. Those who were no people God made into a people.... Not simply a liberation from slavery; it was the formation of a new social order."<sup>240</sup> This description is resonant with the formation of the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) in the 1930s and the entire multi-million-member Twelve Step recovery movement that A.A. spawned. Addicts and alcoholics were (and still are) a marginalized people, yet out of this group emerged a fellowship that finds its strength only in sharing common "experience, strength, and hope" of recovery from the death-grip of addictions with one another, gathered through the grace of, and living one day at a time in the presence of, God. This is God's justice, bestowed on the weakest, the least deserving or the most undeserving. Burghardt notes the same divine impulse amplified in the Second Testament with Jesus' concern with "making all relationships right,"<sup>241</sup> particularly between society and marginalized people, especially those considered ritually unclean like the hemorrhagic woman, blind Bartimaeus, and others all grouped together as "sinners."

Burghardt points out that "in Scripture, sin involves not only our traditional 'offense against God'...but also the sundering of community."<sup>242</sup> As explored earlier, the disease model that underlies Twelve Step recovery holds that members are not "bad people seeking to become good" but "sick people working to get better," a critical distinction that removes the stigma of moral sin from the negative and destructive behaviors of alcoholism/addiction. While the understanding of sin certainly differs from

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<sup>240</sup> Walter J. Burghardt, *Justice: A Global Adventure*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004), 13.

<sup>241</sup> Burghardt, *Justice*, 19.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid*, 15.

Judaism and Christianity to Twelve Step recovery, the notion of recovery is shared between both sources here, in the necessity in both movements of recovering the sundered/broken community of God's chosen and in recovering broken lives and the relationships damaged by the effects of addiction by undertaking the Twelve-Step recovery process.

The process of surrender and humbling necessary to let go of addictions and compulsions to begin the spiritual process of recovery is similar to Burghardt's citation of Jesus' requirement that his disciples prove themselves trustworthy by confessing that they are "unprofitable, worthless, useless"<sup>243</sup> (Luke 17:10). For Christ's first disciples as much as for people following the Twelve Step path of recovery, self-centeredness and self-aggrandizement must be surrendered—the ego must be broken down—in order for new life and new growth in God to take place. A spiritual leveling of the playing field, "letting go" (of our self-centeredness) "and letting God" in (to use a popular recovery slogan), must take place in order for the conditions necessary for an orientation toward justice to flourish.

Burghardt describes Christian fellowship as a *just community* "where, as Paul puts it, no one, absolutely no one, can say to any other, 'I have no need of you' (1 Cor 12:12ff). Not the rich to the poor, the powerful to the powerless, no the bold and beautiful to the timid and repulsive. For we are to be one as Jesus and his Father are one (Jn 12:20-23)."<sup>244</sup> This evokes one of the central Alcoholics Anonymous slogans: "Whenever anyone, anywhere, reaches out for help, I want the hand of A.A. always to be

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<sup>243</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid, 21.

there. And for that: I Am Responsible.”<sup>245</sup> No one is excluded from God’s love or from the table of fellowship. All are equally welcome and equally loved in God’s beloved community. So, too, at least ideally, all drunks and addicts in recovery are equal—just an arm’s length away from a drink or a drug— in the rooms of Twelve Step recovery groups and in the Step By Step recovery ministry. All are equal, equally valued, and equally needed. One cannot recover without the other—the mystery of the recovery process is that it cannot work in isolation but only in community, and in the presence of and under the care of God.

In Burghardt’s exploration of the sacramentalization of justice, the liturgical movement to bring the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ into the worship and lives of faith communities, he describes Friendship House. Founded on Mystical Body principles as a shelter “for the poor and destitute—no questions asked; all were received as God’s ambassadors,” there is a similar sentiment to that expressed in a line from the A.A. Preamble, read at the beginning of most A.A. meetings throughout the world: “The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking.”<sup>246</sup> Again and again, the foundational principles of the Judeo-Christian drive for God’s justice are found at the heart of the Twelve Step recovery process, a place where some of society’s most despised and marginalized people are welcomed and treated equally, received indeed as ambassadors of God’s holy word.

In “Justice Applied,” Burghardt’s description of the criminal justice system has resonance for the recovery process in a different way, pointing out that “the raw material

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<sup>245</sup> Wilson, Bill, 1965 International Convention of Alcoholics Anonymous, Toronto, Canada.

<sup>246</sup> Originally from the *A.A. Grapevine*, cited on aa.org website, January 2005.

of the prison-industrial complex is its inmates, the poor, the homeless, and the mentally ill, drug dealers, drug addicts, alcoholics...sixty to eight percent of the American inmate population has a history of substance abuse.”<sup>247</sup> Furthermore, the inmate population is preponderantly African American male. More than offering a chance for an improved “lifestyle,” recovery offers the chance for many to avoid the triple threat that is the all-too-common outcome of active addiction—institutionalization (for mental illness), imprisonment, or death. But even after someone has been imprisoned, recovery remains an option, although still too uncommon in a prison system that does not emphasize rehabilitation: Burghardt notes that only one in ten inmates who need substance abuse treatment currently receive it.<sup>248</sup> The injustice of such a system is compounded by the lack of opportunity for redemption during punishment.

Burghardt raises up a different model of penance from the Catholics Bishops of the United States’ statement of “Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice.” The bishops note “the current trend of more prisons and more executions with too little education and drug treatment,”<sup>249</sup> and raise up the lessons of First and Second Testaments on the redemption of sinners. The bishops also suggest that the four traditional elements of the sacrament of penance to be instructive: “*contrition*, genuine sorrow over wrongdoing and a serious resolution not to repeat it; *confession*, acknowledgment of, and acceptance of responsibility for, the hurtful behavior; *satisfaction*, the external sign of a desire to amend one’s life through prayers or good needs—compensation or restitution; *absolution*,

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<sup>247</sup> Burghardt, *Justice*, 53.

<sup>248</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid*, 57.

forgiveness of the sin and welcome back into the community.”<sup>250</sup> Here the rehabilitation model and the recovery model have much in common, for the four stages suggested by the bishops are quite similar to the Twelve Steps, particularly those concerned with taking a searching moral inventory and making amends and restitution for past behavior and misdeeds.

The commonalities of Walter Burghardt’s vision of Judeo-Christian justice and justice in Step By Step do have their limits. Twelve Step recovery, by its very nature, is an “inside job,” demanding a personal level of individual responsibility and inner work to change long-ensconced attitudes as well as behaviors. Yet it also is work done in community, a “we” program, where the needs of every member are equally respected and common good held in high regard. While the Twelve Step recovery movement does not address many of the national, international, and global issues and endemic problems plaguing the world that Burghardt attributes to injustice, it does serve as an incubator and laboratory for justice within its own confines and in this way may prepare its members to live more justly. Where Step By Step can take God’s vision for justice further than Twelve Step recovery groups is by its identity as a Christian ministry, which can and should address issues beyond its core concerns of recovery and personal transformation and resurrection, to witness and work for the recovery of all humankind, for the healing and transformation of society and the planet, seeking justice for all of God’s beloved and created in every sphere of creation.

### **Using Extracanonical Sources for Twelve Step Ministry: Good News in the Gospel of Mary for People in Recovery**

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid, 58.



The opportunity to explore extracanonical sources in addition to the customary books of the Christian canon is well worth the effort for any worshipping community for the different perspectives these texts offer. For recovering communities in worship, the chance to experience exiled and marginalized voices can have great resonance and provide openings to identification. To realize that there is something outside the sacred canon of one's formative years—a canon that may have contributed to one's experiences of repression and spiritual abuse—can be enlightening and freeing. In the pages that follow, to provide an example of the rich possibilities of such scripture study, we will explore the possible contributions and connections to Twelve Step Christian theology of one noncanonical text, The Gospel of Mary. Following are three passages from Mary that we will examine:

The Gospel of Mary 5:5-7; 9:2-7; 10:11-14

5:5-7: “Do not weep and be distressed nor let your hearts be irresolute. For his grace will be with you all and will shelter you. Rather we should praise his greatness, for he has joined us together and made us true human beings.” When Mary said this, she turned their minds [to]ward the Good, and they began to [as]k about the wor[d]s of the Savi[or].

9:2-7: “And Desire said, ‘I did not see you go down, yet now I see you go up. So why do you lie since you belong to me?’ The soul answered, ‘I saw you. You did not see me nor did you know me. You (mis)took the garment (I wore) for my (true) self. And you did not recognize me.’ After it had said these things, (the soul) left rejoicing greatly.”

10:11-14: “Instead, we should be ashamed and, once we clothe ourselves with perfect humanity, we should do what we were commanded. We should announce the good news as the Savior ordered, and not be laying down any rules or making laws.” After he said these things, Levi left [and] began to announce the good news.<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>251</sup> King, Karen L., “The Gospel of Mary,” *The Complete Gospels: Annotated Scholars Version*, Robert J. Miller, Editor (Sonoma, California: Polebridge Press 1992), p351-360.

In *The Gospel of Mary*, there is a recurrent theme of “garbing,” and of the covering or uncovering of the “true self,” or “true humanity.” This theme is reflected in texts concerning baptism in the canonical gospels, as well as in other extracanonical gospels and early Christian writings, where the concept of “putting on Christ” can be seen as becoming garbed with Wisdom. My own social location as a recovering alcoholic and a gay man in ministry to communities of people in recovery from various addictions, including the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community. In each of these communities, Christianity, or rather, the established Christian church, often is not valued and is sometimes vilified for its exclusionary and punitive stance toward many marginalized peoples. However, in both the recovery and LGBT communities, the notion of “putting on” Wisdom, whether identified as such or not, is often highly valued. The message found in extracanonical or noncanonical texts like *The Gospel of Mary* present opportunities for a different, less threatening, and possibly more welcoming doorway—to proclaim a gospel of inclusion—through which to invite potential congregations to consider Christian lessons and insights.

### ***History and Setting of the Text***

Only three fragmentary manuscripts of *The Gospel of Mary* are known to have survived into the modern period, one second-century and one third-century fragment<sup>252</sup> in Greek (*Papyrus Rylands* 463, which contains 9.1 - 10.14 of the Coptic manuscript) and *Papyrus Oxyrhynchus* 3525, which contains 17.5-21, 18.5-19.5 of Coptic manuscript) published in 1938 and 1983, and a longer fifth-century Coptic translation (*Papyrus*

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<sup>252</sup> Sources differ on whether both Greek fragments are from the third century (King’s belief) or one is from the second century.

*Berolinensis Gnosticus* 8052) discovered in 1896 and published in 1955. *The Gospel of Mary* manuscript is missing pages 1 to 6, and pages 11 to 14 in any version, which include sections of the text up to chapter 4, and portions of chapter 5 to 8. The communities that used these texts, and the extent to which they were used, is lost to history and remains the subject of theory and conjecture. The fact that the texts were not included in the Christian canon is significant, representing “a particular historical context” and “the establishment of a particular set of power relations” which led to “the exclusion of every significant type of early Christianity that supported women’s leadership.”<sup>253</sup>

Karen L. King notes changes from the second- and third-century Greek versions to the fifth-century Coptic version and “some important variations between the Greek and Coptic manuscripts,” which led King in her translation to:

“give preference to the Greek fragments over the Coptic because they are earlier and are written in the original language of the text, and also because the Coptic variants reflect theological tendencies that arguably belong to a later time. For example, the Greek fragments seem to presume that the leadership of Mary Magdalene as a woman is not under debate; only her teaching is challenged. Changes in the Coptic version, however, point toward a situation in which women’s leadership as such is being challenged and requires defense. The changes in the text may reflect the historical exclusion of women from their earlier leadership roles in Christian communities.”<sup>254</sup>

In the first centuries following the life of Jesus Christ, women played active roles in the fellowship of believers and followers of Christ, held leadership roles, and women’s central role in the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ was lifted up. One such story was that of Mary Magdalene. As has been the case in the stories of women

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<sup>253</sup> Karen L. King, “The Gospel of Mary Magdalene,” *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary*, Volume Two, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 603.

<sup>254</sup> King, “The Gospel of Mary,” *The Complete Gospels*, 351-360.

throughout history, the stories of Mary Magdalene virtually disappeared. As few instances of her words and deeds as possible were left as a patriarchal church hierarchy “redacted” women out of their positions of relative equality and leadership in the church (such as the Montanists), declared certain texts heretical, and spread false accusations about Mary. King reports that although church fathers such as Hippolytus, Origen, and Epiphanius had second-hand knowledge of traditions about Mary, including the existence of groups named after Mary Magdalene as well as Marcellina, Salome, and Martha.<sup>255</sup> but “in general, however, second- and third-century church father seldom mention Mary Magdalene at all.”<sup>256</sup>

In the *Gospel of Mary*, Mary Magdalene appears as a disciple who is singled out by Jesus for special teachings. While the other disciples are fearful for their own lives following Jesus’ crucifixion and death, Mary stands as a leader, a figure of strength who reassures and reminds them that Jesus will always remain with them to protect them. When Peter asks her to share words of Jesus that she only might have been told as his closest confidante, instead of repeating past conversations with Jesus, Mary reports what Jesus said to her that very day in a vision. But Peter challenges the validity of her reported experience.

King notes that “the confrontation of Mary with Peter, a scenario also found in *The Gospel of Thomas*, *Pistis Sophia*, and *The Gospel of the Egyptians*, reflects some of the tensions in second-century Christianity. Peter and Andrew represent orthodox positions that deny the validity of esoteric revelation and reject the authority of women to

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<sup>255</sup> Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 5.62, reported in King, “The Gospel of Mary,” *The Complete Gospels*, 619.

<sup>256</sup> King, “The Gospel of Mary,” *The Complete Gospels*, 619.

teach. *The Gospel of Mary* attacks both of these positions head-on through its portrayal of Mary . . . [as] the Savior's beloved, possessed of knowledge [wisdom] and teaching superior to that of the public apostolic tradition." In addition to Mary's privileged relationship to Jesus, King adds that her "superiority is based on vision and private revelation and is demonstrated in her capacity to strengthen the wavering disciples and turn them toward the Good."<sup>257</sup>

As distant and unclear as the historic Mary Magdalene may seem, the indwelling spirit in the scripture that bears her name continues to live and breathe today, to help new light break forth from God's holy word (to paraphrase Pastor John Robinson) so many years after disappearing into time. One way that *The Gospel of Mary* lives is in its recurring theme of "garbing," and the covering or uncovering of the "true self," or "true humanity." In 5:8, she states that the Savior "has joined us together and made us true human beings." In 9:5-6, the dialogue with Desire, the soul states that "You (mis)took the garment (I wore) for my (true) self. And you did not recognize me." In 10:11, Levi says that "once we clothe ourselves with perfect humanity, we should do what we were commanded." King notes that 10:11 may be a reference to baptism, noting the similarity to the Gospel of Philip 75:21-24: "The living water is a body. It is necessary that we put on the living human being. For this reason, when people are about to go down into the water, they unclothe themselves, so that they might put on (the living human being)."<sup>258</sup> This theme is reflected in various texts concerning baptism in the canonical gospels, as well as in other extracanonical gospels and early Christian writings, where the concept of

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<sup>257</sup> Karen L. King, Introduction, "The Gospel of Mary," *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, James M. Robinson, Editor (San Francisco: HarperCollins 1990), 523-527.

<sup>258</sup> King, "The Gospel of Mary," *The Complete Gospels*, 360.

“putting on Christ” is described in ways that may be interpreted as becoming garbed with Wisdom.

Karen L. King believes that while:

“the Gospel of Mary clearly affirms the legitimacy of women’s apostolic leadership,” this affirmation is not based on “women’s—or men’s—gender, but on the basis of superior spiritual qualifications. Mary is not merely the Savior’s favorite female, as Peter would have it; she is his most favored disciple. Peter appears. . . as the representative of those who would limit Christian teaching to what was public and to the authority of men. Mary. . . represents those Christians who question the validity of any apostolic authority that challenges the truth of their own experience of the living Lord; for them, apostolic authority is not based simply on being one of the Twelve or on gender but on spiritual qualifications. Women who have those qualifications may exercise legitimate authority.”<sup>259</sup>

King also sees that “the rediscovery of *The Gospel of Mary* means that other voices are allowed to speak and views other than those that ‘triumphed’ can be heard.” King points out that “clearly this gospel opposes illegitimate domination—whether by self-made entrapments, enslavement to the Powers of materiality, or the exclusion of women from leadership. . . . it offers powerful images of liberation in its portrait of Mary’s ministry and the soul’s journey to freedom.”<sup>260</sup>

I believe there is a strong appeal of the message of *The Gospel of Mary* as well as the very fact of its recovery from antiquity for ministry to a historically disenfranchised group—people in recovery from alcoholism, drugs, and other addictions and compulsions. Like *The Gospel of Mary* as a text, and the figure of Mary Magdalene whom it depicts, addicts long have been marginalized and forgotten.

### ***Using the Gospel of Mary in Ministry with People in Recovery***

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<sup>259</sup> King, “The Gospel of Mary Magdalene,” *Searching the Scriptures*, 623-624.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid, 625.

With the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.), Bill Wilson and Bob Smith took a class of persons who throughout human history had been at the bottom of society's wasteheap—alcoholics, drunks—and offered them redemption, recovery from what A.A.'s founders defined as the disease of alcoholism. Recovery was based on a spiritual program that called for surrender of self-will to the guidance of a Higher Power. Lives thought to be lost were recovered and given meaning, often for the first time:

“Near you, alcoholics are dying helplessly like people in a sinking ship. If you live in a large place, there are hundreds. High and low, rich and poor, these are [potential] future fellows of Alcoholics Anonymous. Among them you will make lifelong friends. You will be bound to them with new and wonderful ties, for you will escape disaster together and you will commence shoulder to shoulder your common journey. Then you will know what it means to give of yourself that others may survive and rediscover life. You will learn the full meaning of ‘Love thy neighbor as thyself.’ It may seem incredible that these men are to become happy, respected, and useful once more. How can they rise out of such misery, bad repute and hopelessness? The practical answer is that since these things have happened among us, they can happen with you. Should you wish them above all else, and be willing to make use of our experience, we are sure they will come. The age of miracles is still with us. Our own recovery proves that!”<sup>261</sup>

Alcoholics are a marginalized people, long regarded as the lowest of humanity. A.A. has long recognized this with words such as these: “God, in [God’s] wisdom, selected this group of men and women to be the purveyors of [God’s] goodness. In selecting them, through whom to bring about this phenomenon, [God] went not to the proud, the mighty, the famous, or the brilliant; [God] went to the humble, the sick, the unfortunate; [God] went right to the drunkard, the so-called weakling of the world.”<sup>262</sup>

Often, people in recovery describe themselves not only as “recovering addicts” and “recovering alcoholics” but “recovering Christians” or “recovering Roman

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<sup>261</sup> “A Vision for You,” *Alcoholics Anonymous. The Story of How Many Thousands of Men and Women Have Recovered from Alcoholism*. [“The Big Book. “] Third Edition. (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1976), 152-153.

<sup>262</sup> AA and the Higher Power.” Flyer. (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous Publishing, circa 1955.)

Catholics”—particularly in the case of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people so many of whom struggle with some form of addiction or compulsion. The established church has not created a safe and welcome space for most LGBT people, and many have been forced out by denominations, pastors, and congregations who declare them to be sinners or unqualified to participate fully in ministry or congregational leadership. Understandably, many in recovery have chosen to turn their backs not only on their own churches but on organized religion as a whole.

### ***Meaning of the Gospel of Mary for LGBT People in Recovery***

Coming into recovery programs such as A.A., LGBT people reconnect with their yearning for spirituality and discover a face of God—what Twelve-Step literature describes as “a loving God as we understand God”—quite different from the one they experienced as Roman Catholics, Baptists, Pentecostal, or Mormons. Although far from perfect in their acceptance of LGBT people, Twelve-Step groups are places of relatively high levels of openness and acceptance. The new edition of A.A.’s “Big Book” includes for the first time stories of (openly) gay and lesbian alcoholics; A.A. first authorized the establishment of “special interest” meetings for gays and lesbians nearly thirty years ago, providing crucial places of sanctuary for LGBT people to deal openly and honestly with issues of recovery where their sexual orientation would not need to be disguised or hidden. Other programs, such as Sexual Compulsive Anonymous, were created to answer the need for a safe space in which LGBT people could share their struggles with issues around sexuality and intimacy.



There is good news of the *Gospel of Mary* texts about “putting on Christ and Wisdom” for people in recovery. Only in recovery from alcohol and other addictive substances and behaviors can the “false self” of the addict, which has covered or been superimposed over the true self, be stripped away and the true humanity of the now-recovering person be revealed, uncovered, even discovered. Many who share their stories in meetings of Twelve Step groups like Alcoholics Anonymous speak of coming back to themselves, but many others feel that they are finding themselves for the first time—for they had operated under the distorted reality of addiction for so long that they knew no other way.

### ***Wisdom in the Serenity Prayer and the Gospel of Mary***

As noted earlier elsewhere in this paper, one of the “sacred texts” of the recovery movement (and of Step By Step) is the Serenity Prayer. Most A.A. and other Twelve-Step Recovery meetings now either open or close with an abridged version of the “Serenity Prayer” by Reinhold Niebuhr. The words of the current version of the Serenity Prayer and of the longer original encapsulate the essence of the Twelve-Step theology of the God-given nature of acceptance, spiritual peace, wisdom, and the ability to take action. The popular abridged version of the Serenity Prayer reads as follows:

God, grant me the serenity  
to accept the things  
I cannot change,  
Courage to change the  
things I can, and the  
wisdom to know the difference.<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>263</sup> *A.A. Grapevine* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1950).

Wisdom as lifted up in Niebuhr's Serenity Prayer holds a central place of value in Twelve Step recovery. The shared wisdom in A.A. and recovery meetings is the glue that keeps people connected and committed to their recovery programs. Even when the presence and action of God is downplayed in meetings, wisdom is always present and active. The richness of wisdom literature and the sprung logic of its aphorisms and other sayings could have great resonance for people in recovery, who are asked to abandon their old ways of behaving *and thinking* as they surrender to God's will and the beginning of their sobriety and recovery. The rooms of A.A. and other Twelve Step groups are filled with placards of slogans such as "It's the first drink" (that gets you drunk – because alcoholics can't stop after one drink. A popular slogan is "think, think, think," traditionally hung upside down in recognition of the mixed-up thinking ("stinking thinking") that typifies the thought processes of active and sometimes recovering addicts.

### ***"Higher Power" in the Twelve Steps and the Gospel of Mary***

In the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, the first reference to God is as "a Power greater than ourselves," who also is frequently referred to in A.A. as the "Higher Power." In exegeting the meaning of "Higher Power" for people in recovery-based worship, the words of *The Gospel of Mary*, this once-forgotten book outside the traditional canon, can have surprising relevance and resonance. The book's description of the fourth power (which one could call the "lower power") and its seven forms portray many of the most common character defects that people working the Twelve Steps need to identify in their Fourth Step moral inventories and to pray to God to be freed from in

their Seventh Step: “The first form is Darkness; the second, Desire; the third, Ignorance; the fourth, Zeal for Death; the fifth, the Domain of the Flesh; the sixth, the Foolish Wisdom of the Flesh; the seventh is the Wisdom of the Wrathful person. These are the seven Powers of Wrath.” (*Gospel of Mary* 9:18-25)

King describes this world as the lower world, “ruled by darkness, desire, ignorance, and death,” as opposed to the upper world, ruled by “light, peace, knowledge, love, and life.” The opposition is between the lower domain of the flesh and the “heavenly domain of the seed of the true humanity.”<sup>264</sup> This encapsulates the struggle of the alcoholic and addict, first away from the pathway to death represented by the power of addiction, and simultaneously to turn toward the world of light and love, of life.

Addicts must admit their powerlessness and their desire to overcome darkness, in the sense of that word describing the absence of the searching light of honesty and openness. Addicts can defeat the darkness of their own despair and isolation by letting God and other people into their lives. Addicts must admit their powerlessness over desire in its lowest sense, representing the insatiable appetite for substances and sensations whose effects falsely mimic genuine emotional experiences and the quest for genuine intimacy.

Addicts must admit their powerlessness over ignorance—it is through the lack of wisdom that addicts make bad choices that diminish and endanger their own lives and the lives of those around them. The Serenity Prayer asks God to grant each alcoholic “the wisdom to know the difference” between the things one is able to change and those that one is not. The zeal for death is the driving force of all addictions, for ultimately all addicts are seeking to obliterate their feelings and their pain by using deadly substances.

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<sup>264</sup> King, “The Gospel of Mary,” *The Complete Gospels*, 364 n.

Not all addictions and compulsions are as overtly suicidal in their manifestation as drinking a half-gallon of hard liquor a day, injecting heroin with dirty needles, having unprotected sex with prostitutes, or dieting and vomiting so as to keep one's daily caloric intake below the starvation level, but all behaviors that diminish life are leading in the direction of ending or foreshortening life, and certainly reducing the quality of life—all signal more of a drive toward death than an embrace of life.

The final three forces—the domain of the flesh, the foolish wisdom of the flesh, and the wisdom of the wrathful person all point to similar character defects as those mentioned above. The seeming “wisdom” of wrath is described in A.A.’s Tenth Step as the poisonous power of “righteous indignation” and “justifiable anger,” which can be an “occasional luxury of more balanced people,” but can keep alcoholics “on an emotional jag indefinitely. These emotional ‘dry benders’ often led straight [back] to the bottle. Other kinds of disturbances—jealousy, envy, self-pity, or hurt pride—did the same thing.”<sup>265</sup>

Rosemary Radford Ruether believes that:

“implicit in the early Jesus movement is a challenge to religious authority embodied in past revelation and institutionalized in the hands of a privileged group of interpreters. Jesus declares that God has not just spoken in the past but is speaking now. Prophecy is not canonized in past text; the Spirit of God speaks today. Those of low or marginal status (Jesus and his disciples) speak not simply as interpreters of past traditions but as the direct word of God. . . . Jesus frees religious experience from the fossilization of past traditions (which doesn’t mean he rejects those traditions) and makes it accessible in the present. And Jesus does not think of himself as ‘the last word of God’ but points beyond himself to ‘One who will come.’ Thus Jesus restores the sense of God’s prophetic and redemptive activity taking place in the present-future, through people’s present experiences and new possibilities disclosed through those experiences. To encapsulate Jesus himself as “God’s last word” and ‘once-for-all’ disclosure of God, located in a

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<sup>265</sup> *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (New York, Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1981), 90.

remote past and institutionalized in a cast of Christian teachers, is to repudiate the spirit of Jesus and to recapitulate the position against which he himself protests.”<sup>266</sup>

For those in recovery from alcoholism and addictions, from rejection and abuse at the hands of the established church and organized religion, from the damage of a sexist, patriarchal, and homophobic society, The Gospel of Mary offers hope of new words and new revelation from God—through an ancient scripture whose time may finally have come.

“The Gospel of Mary communicates a vision that the world is passing away,” Karen King observes. That passing is “not toward a new creation or a new world order, but toward the dissolution of an illusory chaos of suffering, death, and illegitimate domination.” This is a vision of great empowerment and redemption: “the Savior has come so that each soul might discover its own true spiritual nature, its ‘root’ in the Good, and return to the place of eternal rest beyond the constraints of time, matter, and false morality.”<sup>267</sup> Clearly, the still-powerful ministry and message of the author of the Gospel Mary of Magdala deserves our attention.

## **Conclusion**

With this exegesis of a long-forgotten text in one hand and that miraculous movement that restores people lost to addiction and compulsion in the other, we conclude our chapter on the sacred texts of recovery and Step By Step. The canon is not closed for our ministry as it is not closed to anyone who is open to God’s grace working in their

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<sup>266</sup> Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 121-122.

<sup>267</sup> King, Introduction, “The Gospel of Mary,” *The Complete Gospels*.

lives. How we participate in the miracle of recovery is the focus of Part Two of this paper, on the theory and practice of a Twelve Step Christian Recovery Ministry.

## **PART TWO**

### **A TWELVE STEP RECOVERY MINISTRY IN PRACTICE: BUILDING A FLEXIBLE AND DURABLE CHRISTIAN RECOVERY WORSHIP PROGRAM**

In Part One we examined the historical, theological, biblical, and scientific roots of addiction and recovery, the Twelve Step recovery movement, and the Christian recovery ministry of Step By Step.

Building on this analysis, we enter Part Two of this project, a review and critique of the worship forms and practices of the Step By Step recovery ministry. The purpose of this demonstration project has been to experiment with Step By Step's forms and settings—the elements of its liturgy, its worship leadership, and the settings in which its services are offered. We have done so in order to identify those elements that demonstrate qualities of flexibility and durability to make them more broadly accessible and transferable to a variety of Christian recovery uses.

We begin by reviewing the forms of worship that Step By Step has developed in its seven years of existence. We then explore the changes we made to worship in the course of this project. Finally, we document these changes in the form of a manual, “Starting Your Own Christian Recovery Ministry,” which appears following this paper as Appendix A.

This ministry, and this project, has been all about transformation. The end-result of our demonstration project has been something “beyond our wildest dreams,” to use the language of Twelve Step recovery. We have seen an initial project with the ambitious but relatively contained goal of adapting worship elements and settings blossom into the

beginning of a much wider Christian recovery ministry movement. Establishing new settings has led to the launch of one and then a second “Recovery Sunday” service in two different Step By Step host churches, with liturgical elements developed through this project adopted into a series of regular Sunday worship services. One church has agreed to make this themed service an annual event. We are optimistic that this is only the beginning of many exciting, transformative adaptations of our work in many more settings in the future.

Chapter Five, Our Current and Potential Congregation: Learning about the Religious Practices of People in Recovery and Their Attitudes about Christian Twelve Step Recovery Ministry, analyzes Step By Step’s original setting and social location. It provides data from a survey of current and former congregants of Step By Step, as well as other Christian recovery fellowships, and a broader group of people in recovery, to gain perspective on their religious backgrounds and interest in a recovery ministry such as ours.

Finally, our Conclusion presents a proposal to take these findings to the next step through the establishment of a Resource Center for Recovery Ministries, a program to be housed within the Center for Transformative Practices in Ministry of New York Theological Seminary. The new Center would provide resources and leadership for new Step By Step Christian Recovery Ministries in New York City and throughout the nation along with a broader range of related resources and leadership for churches, seminaries, and other institutions.



**CHAPTER FOUR:**  
**“I NEVER SANG IN A MEETING BEFORE!”**  
**BRINGING TWELVE STEP RECOVERY AND CHRISTIAN PRACTICE**  
**TOGETHER THROUGH THE ARTS OF WORSHIP**

**Introduction**

A primary focus of this demonstration project has been to experiment with Step By Step’s forms and settings—the elements of its liturgy, its worship participants, and the settings in which its services are offered—in order to identify those elements that demonstrate qualities of flexibility and durability to make them more broadly accessible and transferable to a variety of Christian recovery uses. To begin, we will outline Step By Step’s theology of worship. With this framework in place, we will review and analyze the worship forms and practices of the Step By Step recovery ministry. Finally, we will document the changes we made and what these changes reveal about conducting Twelve Step Christian recovery worship in a broader context.

**Step By Step’s Theology of Worship**

All Christian worship is informed by a particular theology, and beyond Step By Step’s underlying theologies of liberation, radical inclusion, and grace, Step By Step also has a theology of worship. In a general sense, since Step By Step is a Christian worship service, its theology of worship is similar to that of much other mainline Protestant Christian worship.

Samuel Torvend describes Christian worship as being:

“marked by a pattern of gathering; proclaiming and responding to the word of God; praying for the world and the church; preparing the table, offering thanksgiving and sharing the meal; receiving God’s blessing and departing for service in the world. These

basic departments—present in Luke’s Gospel and the ongoing life of the church—constitute the center of the church’s worship.”<sup>268</sup>

Most of these descriptions are apt descriptions for what happens in Step By Step worship. The *Worship Sourcebook* identifies eight foundational principles for a theology of worship, stating that Christian worship should be the following: biblical; dialogic, a time and place where “God speaks and God listens;” covenantal; Trinitarian; communal; hospitable, caring, and welcoming; “in but not of” the world;” and “a generous and excellent outpouring of ourselves before God....not stingy.”<sup>269</sup> All of these descriptions apply to Step By Step, and to this list I would add a final and crucial descriptor: worship must be *transformative*.

In Step By Step, the experience may be comforting, healing, refreshing, revitalizing, restful, challenging, or many other things, but worshippers should leave with a sense of the transformation that comes with a renewed sense of purpose in recovery—and of their recovery as a gift and grace of God to be cherished, nurtured, and celebrated. Transformation, as Warren Wiersbe notes, “can be dangerous. Transformation changes us from within and often carries stiff consequences; old wounds exposed, new wounds inflicted, and those who wish to remain in their comfort zones will be offended. None of these things, however, should stop us from pursuing the worship of God.”<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>268</sup> Samuel Torvend, *Sundays & Seasons: Worship Planning Guide, Year of Luke, Cycle C* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 6.

<sup>269</sup> “Towards a Theology of Worship,” Prologue, *The Worship Sourcebook*, co-publication of the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, <http://www.calvin.edu/worship/resources/theology.php> Accessed 1/15/07.

<sup>270</sup> James Rahtjen, book review paraphrasing Warren Wiersbe, *Real Worship: It Will Transform Your Life*

(Nashville: Oliver Nelson, 1986), [http://the-highway.com/br\\_realworship.html](http://the-highway.com/br_realworship.html). Accessed 1/15/07.

Rebecca S. Chopp invites us more broadly to “imagine the public space differently, to think the ‘we’ in new ways, to sing new songs, to live in ways that enact and embody transformation.” She cites the work of theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and other feminist theologians who:

“show us a vision of the ecclesial public as a place of solidarity in which ecclesial citizens participate fully no matter what their sex, race, class, or sexual orientation. The images feminists use, such as the *ekklesia*, the community of friends, and the roundtable, all suggest that the public is a place where differences are embodied and embraced and no body suffers or is rendered invisible because of its difference. This.. [is] a public space where, in and through our solidarity, we understand difference, understand differently, and seek to redeem suffering, to struggle against hegemonic integration, to enact change.”<sup>271</sup>

### **“What Happens?” in Step By Step Worship**

Dr. Janet Walton, a scholar of worship and performance, invites observers of worship services always to ask: “What happened?” in the course of the service. What happens in effective Christian worship is what Nils-Henrik Nilsson describes as “the continuous meeting with God in worship. God is present when we worship and through his [sic] Spirit God is at work in his church in order to strengthen our faith.”<sup>272</sup> Worship, Nilsson continues, “articulates our faith, what we believe and how we believe but at the same time the service nourishes our faith and shapes both the innermost faith of our

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<sup>271</sup> Rebecca S. Chopp, “Reimagining Public Discourse,” Concept Paper for the Academic Workshop.

Cape Town, 30 September - 2 October 1998,  
[http://web.uct.ac.za/depts/ricsa/confer/me99/con\\_paps/chopp.htm](http://web.uct.ac.za/depts/ricsa/confer/me99/con_paps/chopp.htm). Accessed 1/7/07.

<sup>272</sup> Nils-Henrik Nilsson, “A Theology of Worship: A Pastoral Approach,”  
[http://www.hi.is/nam/gudfr/efni/nhn\\_theology\\_of\\_worship.pdf](http://www.hi.is/nam/gudfr/efni/nhn_theology_of_worship.pdf). Accessed 1/15/07, 2.

hearts and the way that we, by word and deed, express what we believe in.”<sup>273</sup> He explains that “it is in worship that we gain a living encounter with [Jesus]. Otherwise we remain locked up in our own chambers of study.”<sup>274</sup>

Nilsson explains that “the service of worship is always part of a larger context. In the churches, the liturgy is celebrated together with all Christians of all times, and the Christian liturgy is seen as part of the eternal worship in heaven. Even so, the liturgy is not static or unchangeable. Language and other modes of expression change. There is no heavenly language that we can learn to speak already here and now apart from the language of faith and love. All Christian worship is part of a cultural context and interacts with its contemporary surroundings. Everything we say and do in the liturgy is perceived from where we are in our lives and depends on how we live and express ourselves.”<sup>275</sup>

However, Step By Step has some significant differences. Just as the whole person needs to come into recovery—physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually—so do all the senses and the entire body require ministry in a Twelve Step recovery service. For people in recovery, ministry must be holistic, not centered too much in the head, or the heart, or any other part of the body, because the nature of addiction and compulsion has been to alienate and distance aspects of the body and the self from one another. The addict feeds a drug like crystal methamphetamine to his brain receptors to experience a mental and emotional high even as the drug he is ingesting raises his blood pressure, poisons his liver and kidneys, and starves his vital organs of nutrients by suppressing his

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<sup>273</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid, 4.

desire to take in nourishment. Although it is cold outside, he feels he is burning up and walks without a coat because his body is not responding to the simplest signals from nature that are necessary for his very survival. Meanwhile, chasing the high, the addict neglects or abandons his social system so that love, companionship, support, and other crucial forms of social nourishment are cut off as well.

When people like the addict described above come into recovery, all the systems that have broken down must be rebuilt. For recovering addicts coming to a Twelve Step recovery ministry, it is not enough to preach sin and salvation, it is not enough to sing hymns of joy and praise, we must do more, we must offer more. We must respond to the reality of *redemption from certain death* and the spectre of imminent Death that overhangs the life of every person in recovery. For every one person who is given the grace of recovery either through the path of the Twelve Steps or through other means of abstinence, there are nine others who do not receive this priceless gift. Every person in recovery remembers and mourns many peers who have died from the disease of addiction and compulsion, and every person in recovery knows the deep and jarring wisdom of the person who remarks to someone complaining about a trivial problem in their life, “Shut the f\*\*\* up, you should be dead!”<sup>276</sup> Because, ultimately, virtually any problem in life is trivial compared to the option of not having a life.

I will illustrate my point with a brief personal testimony. One of the most heartbreaking events in my recovery journey was helping to lead a special memorial service hosted by my A.A. “home group,” Live and Let Live in New York City, for a member and casual friend, who I will call “Jack,” who had “gone out”—picked up

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<sup>276</sup> Reported by Bob A. from a qualification heard at the Sheridan Square Follies group of Alcoholics Anonymous, 2005.

alcohol and drugs again, and had died of an accidental overdose. John was one of the golden boys of our group—attractive, bright, engaging, full of potential, ideas, and plans. But in the months after he drifted away from meetings and secretly began using substances again, he seemed changed in the brief encounters I had with him around the building where we both worked. His skin looked ashen and pasty, he appeared to have gained weight and to be bloated, he could not meet my gaze, he was evasive. He was “using” again, I now recognize, and filled with shame and unable to beat back the demon of his disease, he was in flight from wholeness and God and heading toward death. I last saw him a few weeks before he was found dead. He had been in the program of recovery longer than I, proving that even long-term sobriety provides no guarantees for the addict. Only continually surrendering, continually working the program of recovery and the Steps, and praying continuously will help keep the powers of death at bay, one day at a time. Our memorial service was filled with tears and laughter, with shared memories of Jack and with prayer, but it was primarily focused on those still living—the current members of the group—and their testimonies of the terrible power of this disease.

A related perspective for understanding Step By Step is described well in Northrop Frye’s narrative schema (cited by Carroll, Dudley, McKinney et al.) of a *romance* with the possibility of *tragedy* always lurking on the periphery.<sup>277</sup> People journeying on the path of recovery are very much in love with life, with God, and filled with love for other members of the fellowship and with the very program of recovery itself, sometimes basking in the glow of lives being saved and transformed (the “pink

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<sup>277</sup> Jackson W. Carroll, Carl S. Dudley, and William McKinney, et al., eds., *Handbook for Congregational Studies* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 32-33, referring to Northrop Frye’s *The Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1937).

cloud” of early recovery particularly comes to mind). As in all romances, there are advances and setbacks, and the flipside of love can be boredom, irritation, anger, or even hatred directed at particular aspects of the recovery process with which someone is having difficulty at that moment. Overall, the panoply of emotions evoked by the recovery experience are classic romantic responses.

While recovery groups and Step By Step are places of romance, there is always the reminder of tragic consequences—people who come into recovery and “go out” again, often never to be seen again, sometimes—all too often, in fact—to die. For those who stay close to the program or to Step By Step, there is that awful beauty of a great gift, a grace, which can be squandered and lost, because although it is the simplest thing in the world to remain sober—it can be too simple sometimes for tragically complex human beings.

Offering an uplifting worship experience of romance haunted by tragedy, always in the shadow of Death—this is the Step By Step difference, and the Step By Step challenge. Perhaps this explains why there are so many Christian recovery ministries but few if any other Christian recovery worship ministries.

How Step By Step accomplishes this theological and liturgical high-wire balancing act again returns to the power of storytelling. As Kurtz and Ketcham explain, “what it takes to ‘fix the drunks’...involved not only not drinking, it also required throwing out the old way of life—the old map that was their former way of interpreting reality—and learning to follow a new map, a new way of life that would allow them to be

both sober and alcoholic. And that way of life, they discovered, could be learning and taught only through the process of telling stories.”<sup>278</sup>

Public testimony, which Bernhard Lang describes as “the celebratory recital of God’s mighty acts... [that] forms part of all Christian worship,”<sup>279</sup> is at the very heart of the Step By Step worship experience. For some worshipping communities, this has an “immediate sense. God not only acted in biblical times; he still acts today,” and, increasingly in modern times, a new element of worship developed, of:

“individual thanksgiving, in the form of giving personal testimony to God’s activity, has become a regular feature of worship especially in charismatic and free-Protestant churches.... Lay persons... speak up and give ‘testimony.’ Individuals are asked to tell the congregation what the Lord has done with them and for them.... How they found faith in Christ and how Jesus transformed their lives, bringing them from nominal church membership to true belief and sincere commitment.... How their prayers have been answered, how the Lord has helped them in unexpected and unforeseeable ways.”<sup>280</sup>

This is certainly the case in Step By Step, where not only does the preacher almost always reference her or his own personal journey of recovery and redemption, but most members of the congregation also give testimony in one or more sections of the service designated as times for sharing or interaction. Chopp explains the theology of testimony in this way:

“Testimonies enact a moral consciousness and a social, even at times, global responsibility....[invoking] an ethical claim—it is from someone to someone about something. And in testifying, one summons the hearer to respond. A decision is called for, a change in reality is required.... Testimony summons the public space to serve those who suffer and hope, those whose voices testify to survival, those who dare to imagine and enact transformation. It summons the public space to serve them in their particularity, rather than drawing them into the image of an existing and partial ‘we’.... Testimony functions as a moral discourse, as a summons to otherness, and this discourse works by requiring that the public be ethically constituted through hearing those who suffer, who

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<sup>278</sup> Kurtz and Ketcham, *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, 114 .

<sup>279</sup>Bernhard Lang, *Sacred Games: A History of Christian Worship* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 49.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid, 8-9.



have been forced to be the ‘others’ of history. But testimony is not simply in terms of the social reality, it is also in reference to the absolute. In the ecclesial public, the church is the space of God and the people of God working on behalf of the oppressed.”<sup>281</sup>

Chopp concludes that:

“If testimony tells us who we are and shapes us in the present through remembering those forgotten in the past, we must also ask how it helps us to imagine ourselves and others living differently in the future. As Ricoeur has suggested, testimony has a utopian, prospective sense, as well as a historical, retrospective sense. One testifies not only so the truth will be told but, according to both the juridical and religious senses of testimony, so that the future might be lived differently in light of the history of suffering. Testimony requires truth about the past and insists on justice as the goal for the future.”<sup>282</sup>

In the course of this demonstration project, testimony has been reintroduced as a feature in some worship services, taking the place of the Ritual section of the service, with one or two members invited to share their own stories of recovery and redemption. Based on this understanding of the framework of the power of testimony as foundational in Step By Step, let us now move to examine Step By Step’s structure and essential elements.

### **Step By Step’s Sites**

At the beginning of this project in 2006, Step By Step offered two worship services monthly, and currently holds four evening worship services each month, all at 7:00 p.m. Services are held on the first Tuesday of the month at Metropolitan Community Church of New York, 446 West 36th Street, between 9th & 10th Avenues, New York City, in the Main Sanctuary of that congregation; the second Sunday at The Riverside

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<sup>281</sup> Chopp, “Reimagining Public Discourse.”

<sup>282</sup> Ibid.

Church, Claremont Avenue and 121<sup>st</sup> Street, New York City, in the Meditation Chapel; the third Tuesday of the month at Union Theological Seminary, 3041 Broadway at 121<sup>st</sup> Street, New York City, in Lampman Chapel, and the fourth Monday of the month at Middle Collegiate Church, 50 East 7<sup>th</sup> Street at Second Avenue, New York City, in a meeting room on the third floor. Worship services generally run about one hour and fifteen minutes. In addition, Step By Step offers weekly anonymous Twelve-Step Study meetings held on Wednesdays from 12:30-1:00 p.m. in Lampman Chapel.

### **Step By Step as Small Group Ministry**

When Annie Ruth Powell first launched Step By Step in 2000, it was conceived as a large praise-and-testimony service with a large musical ensemble, numerous speakers, and programmed as well as spontaneous witness by congregants, with a message on scripture and the Steps as the centerpiece, preached either by Dr. Powell or another preacher in her ministry team. A music ministry of amplified contemporary gospel music included guitars, electric keyboard, and percussion. In reality, after the first service, attendance was consistently low and, as one guest preacher reported, at the service he led, “there was only one person in the congregation.”<sup>283</sup>

In its second incarnation since 2001, Step By Step came to recognize the specialized appeal of its ministry, and evolved into a small group ministry. Originally meeting as Dr. Powell’s Step By Step did in the 200-person capacity James Memorial Chapel at Union Seminary, we began to cluster the chairs into a small circle either in the front or on the side of the chapel to create a more intimate worship environment, with tables of literature and refreshments at the entrance of the space. Occasionally, because

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<sup>283</sup> Reported to me by Norris C., November 2005, referring to a service in early 2001.

of scheduling conflicts with other programs at Union, we would worship in the much smaller and more intimate Lampman Chapel at Union and a number of congregants preferred this setting. Finally, after 2003, we moved permanently to Lampman, again setting chairs in a circle and creating the kind of smaller safe space that has turned out to be particularly conducive to Step By Step's liturgical form.

A great advantage of Lampman is the ability to close the doors and have an environment where personal sharing on sensitive or confidential issues will not be overheard as might be the case in the large and more open James Chapel. The greatest disadvantage in Lampman was the loss of a good piano. James Chapel has a very good, well-tuned grand piano, while Lampman has an out-of-tune upright that on many occasions was moved out of the chapel altogether on the nights of worship services. Sometimes we were able to get the piano moved back into the space in time for the service but other times we had to do without accompaniment. Combined with the issue of the lack of "singability" of our hymns, to be discussed later in this chapter, singing *a capella* without a pianist providing the tune was challenging at best.

At first I felt that our evolution into a small group ministry represented a failure to adequately evangelize, to get the word out about our unique worship experience. So much preparation of the worship components, such great messages from wonderful guest preachers, such carefully crafted ritual exercises designed to make the message of the Steps real and practical for people in the here and now—all this excellent, creative work was being "wasted" on a small congregation of six or eight souls. As time went on and we moved into a rhythm of these services, my co-ministers, music ministers, regular congregants, and I began to deeply cherish the closeness and emotional connection of

these intimate gatherings. We were not failing at our mission, we were discovering and living into our mission.

The power of small groups has been extensively studied and analyzed by Robert Wuthnow in his book *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community*. Wuthnow conducted a major national study analyzing the small group movement—its breadth and scope and the reasons for the incredible growth of small groups as a nationwide phenomenon in the past generation. He has special praise for the value of religiously oriented small groups, noting that:

“the quest for spirituality... has animated much of the small-group movement. A majority of all small-group members said they joined because they wanted to deepen their faith. Nearly two thirds of all small groups have some connection to churches or synagogues. Many have been initiated by clergy. Many devote their meetings to studying the Bible or to discussion other religious texts. Most include prayer. Embarking on a s spiritual journey is a common theme among members. Some would argue that this trend is indicative simply of third in the human heart for a relationship with God. But why now? Why has the small-group movement become the vehicle for expressing this desire? Why not churches? Or religious television? Or individual devotional readings and meditations?”<sup>284</sup>

Wuthnow responds to these questions by explaining that rather than representing a symptom of the failure of American churches, the small group, by virtue of its deep connections to churches that establish and host these groups and often provide pastoral leadership for them, is “an extension of the role that organized religion has always played in American society,” and that “the small-group movement is currently playing a major role in adapting American religion to the main currents of secular culture that have surfaced at the end of the twentieth century.... Small groups provide greater variety and allow greater freedom in selecting the religion of one's choice that ever before. They

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<sup>284</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 6.

make faith more fluid, championing change itself, and creating modular communities that can be established and disbanded with relative ease.”<sup>285</sup>

Wuthnow also describes the “small-groups paradox,” in which there is a:

“relatively high degree of formal organization—leaders, goals, and agendas in most groups; lessons to study, business meetings, and elected officers in many others. It also involved a relatively high degree of informality—warmth, encouragement, acceptance, and the privilege of talking openly about one’s personal problems and interests. The paradox, moreover, is genuine: the informality of small groups depends on having formal structure, and the formal structure is tolerated only because of the informality it encourages.... Formal structures create a space... for people to get to know each other. Trust can develop more easily because people do not have to worry much about group goals.”<sup>286</sup>

Wuthnow’s models for understanding small groups describe well some of the structures and dynamics underlying the Step By Step Recovery Ministry. The structured nature of Step By Step worship, led by a stable worship team, provides the framework for freedom to experience transformation and recovery in a safe and supportive environment. Knowing what is *going* to happen, to paraphrase Janet Walton, and who can be expected to do what, provides a comfort zone in which congregants can “let go and let God.” This is not to say that there are no surprises in Step By Step. But a predictable structure for worship provides reassurance, both to people from the Twelve Step recovery tradition, and to people familiar with formal orders of worship and established liturgies in the Christian church.

In Twelve Step fellowships, at most meetings the chair or group leader reads or recites a description of what is going to happen at the meeting, introducing him or herself, inviting various participants to read the Preamble, Twelve Steps, Promises, or How It Works, to name the most popular readings. The chair explains the format of the

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<sup>285</sup> Wuthnow, 8-9.

<sup>286</sup> Wuthnow, 158-159.

meeting: someone will read the Step if it is a Step meeting, a speaker will qualify (give personal testimony on his or her recovery journey) for a specified amount of time, there is a secretary's or "Seventh Tradition" break to pass the basket (to raise the rent for the room in which the meeting is being held and for other program-related expenses such as refreshments or contributions to the various levels of the local, regional, and national Twelve Step organization to which the fellowship belongs), and then, depending on the meeting format, there is a voluntary show of hands for sharing by members or a round-robin for meetings held in a circle where members share in order. In many meetings, people who are new or "counting days" in their sobriety or on their recovery plans will share that day count during the secretary's break and depending on the focus of the meeting (for beginners, Step, open meeting, or topic meeting), beginners may be invited to share first. The order of worship that follows for Step By Step's worship services will make clear how certain elements of traditional Twelve Step meetings have been incorporated into worship.

### **Format and Order of Worship**

Following is the standard form of worship used with very little variation in Step By Step from October 2001 to the present. In the course of this demonstration project in 2006, various elements of this format were added, and personnel changed. These are noted in italics.

#### **Step By Step Worship: Order of Service**

**Opening Music**

*Minister of Music*

**Call to Worship**

*Based on the Serenity Prayer (long version) by Reinhold Niebuhr  
(Congregational response in Bold)*

God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things which should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.

**God's will, not ours, be done.**

Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time, accepting hardship as a pathway to peace.

**God's will, not ours, be done.**

Taking this sinful world as it is, not as we would have it, trusting that You will make all things right, if we surrender to Your will.

**God's will, not ours, be done.**

So that we may be reasonably happy in this life, and supremely happy with You forever in the next.

**God's will, not ours, be done. Amen.**

***Step By Step Preamble***

Student Intern

**Hymn**

Congregation

**Invocation, Reading of the Step, and  
Check-Ins**

Co-Minister

**Hymn**

Congregation

**Scripture**

Lay Reader

**Sermon**

Co-Minister or Guest Preacher

***Ritual or Testimony***

Co-Minister or Guest Preacher

**Offering**

Co-Minister

**Hymn**

Congregation

**Benediction**

Co-Minister or Guest Preacher

The Offering is taken at two of the four meetings, where rent (whatever amount is contributed in the offering constituting the rent for that month) is required by the host church. Union Theological Seminary and Metropolitan Community Church consider Step By Step to be ministries of their respective organizations and therefore do not

require rent. Step By Step's expenses are covered through indirect support from Union Seminary and through a grant from the Presbytery of New York City.

A final note on this order of worship: in the course of this project, testimonies were reintroduced, usually substituted for the Ritual, as described below.

### **Central Elements of Step By Step Worship**

***Worship Bulletin:*** Each Step By Step service (in each of its sites) uses a worship bulletin with a standard design. See Appendix \_\_\_ for a sample worship bulletin. The bulletin includes the Order of Service (above), a list of the Twelve Steps of Spiritual Recovery, the full text of the scripture for the service, the Mission Statement, and a list of all Step By Step services, along with their locations, dates, and times for the coming year.

***Mission Statement:*** The Mission Statement appears on the Step By Step website, on flyers and other publications, and in the worship bulletins. It reads as follows:

A ministry for all people striving for spiritual wholeness, Step By Step integrates the tools of the Twelve Step Recovery Movement developed by Alcoholics Anonymous with Christian principles, practice, and worship. In monthly workshops and worship services, Step By Step offers doorways to freedom from compulsive, destructive, and addictive behaviors, attitudes and relationships that prevent us from reaching our fullest potential as beloved and loving children of God. Step By Step's ministry crosses the boundaries of all addictions and all compulsions, using the wealth of wisdom offered by many different Twelve-Step programs to help people deal with problems such as overeating and anorexia, problem drinking, gambling, drug use, spending and debting, sexual compulsion, rage, and unhealthy dependent relationships.

***Statement of Confidentiality:*** Step By Step worship services and Step meetings are intentionally declared to be safe spaces, with a guarantee of anonymity for participants, although obviously not for leaders, whose names appear on printed material and in publicity and as e-mail and telephone contacts. A standard Twelve-Step Program statement, "Who you see here, what you hear here, let it stay here so this remains a safe



place for all of us to share,” is made at every meeting. Another clarifying statement also is offered: “It’s all right for me to say that I was here, and it’s all right for you to say you were here, but it’s not all right for me to say that *you* were here, or for you to say that *I* was here.”

***Liturgical Elements:*** Among the liturgical elements used by Step By Step are prayers from the A.A. “Big Book,” the Serenity Prayer (both the original and adapted versions), and other prayers created by the Co-Ministers and Guest Preachers. Hymns and other music are a regular element of Step By Step worship, with the United Church of Christ *New Century Hymnal* and the *Metropolitan Community Church Hymnal* used in Lampman Chapel and MCC, respectively, and music photocopied from other hymnals, music books, and internet sources used at these sites as well as The Riverside Church and Middle Collegiate Church. Guest preachers have the option of bringing music from other sources, which is photocopied and distributed to the congregation along with worship bulletins.

***Music:*** Music, including hymns, plays a central role in Step By Step worship. Writing about Pentecostalism in light of its Methodist roots, Bernhard Lang reports that John Wesley praised “simple, melodious, moving music, preferring it to the sterility of unemotional productions based on academic ideas of harmony. Music, for Wesley and the classical Pentecostal tradition, must charge the atmosphere, stir up emotions, and thus open people’s hearts to God. Another tradition present in Pentecostal circles is that of Spirit-filled singing, an idea inherited... from German pietism. Filled or even ‘inebriated’ with the divine Spirit, the human heart begins to sing with much enthusiasm—hence the pietists’ traditional *Singstunden*, lay meetings dedicated to

spiritual singing.”<sup>287</sup> The notion of worshippers in recovery being “inebriated” by the Holy Spirit is not as inappropriate as it might appear on first glance. One of the goals of living “life on life’s terms” in recovery is to experience the full range of human emotion—the highs and the lows—without the assistance of substances or addictive/compulsive behaviors. Being uplifted in a spiritual inebriation by glorious music is the kind of natural “high” that people in recovery discover is far better than the artificial kinds of highs they used to rely upon.

***The Cross:*** The cross is present in three of four worship spaces used by Step By Step, with a cross on the altar and an Orthodox-style icon of Christ on the wall at the front of Lampman Chapel, along with a number of other religious icons and another large cross on another wall. Metropolitan Community Church has an altar with cross at the front of the sanctuary, and on the wall in the Meditation Chapel at The Riverside Church. We plan to bring a portable freestanding cross to Middle Collegiate Church to place on the table of our meeting room.

***Sacraments:*** As a Christian fellowship in the Reformed Protestant tradition, Step By Step observes two sacraments, Holy Communion and Baptism. To date, Step By Step has celebrated Communion in one service, to be described later in this chapter. Step By Step’s leaders have discussed what would happen if a believer came requesting Baptism and feel that it would be appropriate and desirable for Step By Step to offer this sacrament to a seeker, following a period of religious instruction. At this time in its history, Step By Step has not received such a request from any of its members. Although there is widespread belief in Twelve Step recovery and in Step By Step that recovery

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<sup>287</sup> Bernhard Lang, *Sacred Games*, 402.

from addictions and compulsions is a new birth and a second chance at life, it is not our belief that a born-again style “second Baptism” should be given in recognition of this experience.

***Prayer:*** As the author of James writes (5:16), “The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.” Step By Step emphasizes both written prayer through its use of the Serenity Prayer in the Call to Worship, and extemporaneous prayer in the Invocation. Additional prayers are often added as a response to personal sharing during the Check-ins or the Ritual, and the Ritual often includes prayer as well. Finally, the Benediction is usually prayed extemporaneously as well, and members of the congregation are often invited to share in a group benediction of many voices lifted up to God in prayer. On some occasions, the short version. Our theology of prayer, evidenced in six years of practice, is described well by Lang, as “a supplication spoken by someone filled with God’s Spirit [that] cannot fail to produce results.”<sup>288</sup>

***The Serenity Prayer:*** A central element in Twelve Step recovery, and in Step By Step, is the Serenity Prayer (discussed in depth in Chapter Two), which serves as Call To Worship, Benediction, and mantra, a tool for spiritual discipline, uplift, hope, and consolation.

***Sacred Texts of Step By Step:*** As described in depth in Chapter Three, Holy Scripture is a primary sacred text for Step By Step, as is the literature of Twelve-Step recovery, especially the primary text *Alcoholics Anonymous* (the “Big Book”) and Step By Step’s adaptation of the “Twelve Steps of Spiritual Recovery.” A synopsis of the

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<sup>288</sup> Bernhard Lang, *Sacred Games*, 402.

Steps, adapted from the A.A. “Twelve and Twelve,” is used in the weekly Step Study meeting.

***Preaching:*** In keeping with its Reformed tradition, Step By Step honors the preached Word. The style of delivery of sermons varies from preacher to preacher, with some preaching from prepared texts, others from notes or notecards, and others preaching extemporaneously. A selection of written sermons from Step By Step is found in Appendix A and one sample sermon is offered at the conclusion of this chapter.

Clement of Alexandria’s definition of the purpose of preaching from the second century remains true for the church, and for Step By Step today: “So, my brothers and sisters, after the God of truth [has spoken to you in the scriptural lesson], I am reading you an exhortation to heed what was there written, so that you may save yourselves.” Charles Spurgeon in the nineteenth century restated Clement’s view in this way: “God has sent us to preach in order that through the Gospel of Jesus Christ the sons of men may be reconciled to Him.... For the most part, the work of preaching is intended to save the hearers.”<sup>289</sup>

***Testimony:*** As described earlier, in the course of this project, Step By Step reintroduced testimony into some of its services. Lang says of testimony that “despite their great variety of style and content, testimonies can generally be defined as autobiographical stories that include a religious interpretation. Without that interpretation, the story would not be a testimony and therefore, in the eyes of the congregation, not worth telling.”<sup>290</sup> In services where there is no formal section for

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<sup>289</sup> Clement and Charles Spurgeon cited by Bernard Lang, *Sacred Games*, 149.

<sup>290</sup> Bernhard Lang, *Sacred Games*, 49.

testimony, the time for Check-ins by the congregation and interactive sharing during the Ritual provide opportunities for people to share what they need to share and request help and support from God and from the group.

***Ritual:*** The Ritual has been used since 2001 as a way of encouraging interaction and deeper reflection among worship participants. Varying from service to service, the Ritual has included such practices as healing prayer, movement, writing/journaling, candle-lighting, one-on-one dialogue, and group sharing. The Ritual tends to lift up a concern or element of the Step or Steps that are the focus of the evening's service.

***Worksheets on the Twelve Steps and Other Recovery Tools:*** These are distributed as resources for the interactive "Ritual" section of worship services, and as materials to take home and work on independently. Samples can be found in Appendix A, the workbook entitled "Starting Your Own Twelve Step Recovery Ministry: A Users Manual and Workbook."

### **"I Never Sang at a Meeting Before!" The Use of Hymns and Other Music in Step By Step**

The above profile of the essential elements in Step By Step worship includes hymns, but hymnody is such a central element of Step By Step that it deserves some further discussion. The title of this section comes from a statement by a new member of the Step By Step ministry at Metropolitan Community Church, who had been attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings for many years and had read about Step By Step in one of our online advertisements on Craigslist.com. Following the meeting he exclaimed in wonder, "I never sang in a meeting before!"—that is to say, a Twelve Step meeting. And although Step By Step does not present or describe itself as a "meeting" but rather as a

“worship service,” the significance of his statement was clear. The experience of transformation that takes place in any Twelve Step meeting is taken to a new dimension through the introduction of elements of worship, and one of the most powerful of these is music and especially hymnody.

Hymns, Frank Colquhoun writes, “are the popular element in religion, the people’s part in divine service.... A great many people who have little interest in institutional Christianity obviously enjoy singing hymns and listening to them.... The people sing their hymns, and in their hymns they find a medium for expressing their faith.” At the same time, “for the most part people do not know much about the hymns they sing....what some of their language is about.”<sup>291</sup>

Augustine defined hymns in this way, a description that continues to ring true: a hymn is “the praise of God in song.”<sup>292</sup> Thomas Aquinas, in the introduction to his commentary on the Psalms, expanded on Augustine’s definition by describing the Christian hymn as “the praise of God with song; a song is the exultation of the mind dwelling on eternal things, bursting forth in the voice.”<sup>293</sup> Colquhoun states that, in modern times, “probably more than any other single source, hymns have played a central role in the devotional lives of American Protestants, opening a window on both the shared theology and the deepest emotions of the average person in the pews.”<sup>294</sup>

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<sup>291</sup> Frank Colquhoun, *Hymns That Live: Their Meaning and Message* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 9.

<sup>292</sup> Alec Robertson, “Hymns, Latin,” *A Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, ed. J. G. Davies (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 194, citing Augustine’s commentary on Psalm 148:14.

<sup>293</sup> Cited in “Hymns,” Faithstreams...Light for the Journey, <http://www.faithstreams.com/ME2/Sites/Default.asp?SiteID=B7D7C6F961D544EAA8B41BCE7DD77945>. Accessed 1/20/07.

<sup>294</sup> “Hymnody in American Protestantism Project,” <http://www.wheaton.edu/isae/hymns.html>. Accessed 1/8/07.

It has been a goal of Step By Step to provide music that is tuneful and able to be sung easily and well by a small group of individuals, many of whom may not read music or be strong singers. In our first several years of Step By Step at Union Theological Seminary working exclusively with United Church of Christ's *The New Century Hymnal*, we learned by uncomfortable experience the pitfalls of selecting a hymn based on the message contained in its text, or based on its references to the scripture passage being studied at a particular service. A number of difficult or unmelodic tunes were selected by myself, another of the Co-Ministers, or the Minister of Music to bad effect, dragging down the spirit of the service as the congregation struggled through an unfamiliar or unsingable tune.

An excellent understanding of the proper role of hymnody in Step By Step is found in a description of African American sacred song by Thea Bowman, in which she describes the characteristics of this kind of music as follows. African American hymns—like the hymns and songs selected for Step By Step—should be:

1. *holistic*: challenging the full engagement of mind, imagination, memory, feeling, emotion, voice, and body;
2. *participatory*: inviting the worshipping community to join in contemplation, in celebration, and in prayer;
3. *real*: celebrating the immediate concrete reality of the worshipping community—grief or separation, struggle or oppression, determination or joy—bringing that reality to prayer within the community of believers;
4. *spirit-filled*: energetic, engrossing, intense;
5. *life-giving*: refreshing, encouraging, consoling, invigorating, sustaining.<sup>295</sup>

Affirming this theology of hymnody, Step By Step has in the past two years and particularly in the year of this project, adopted a number of hymns and songs that have particular resonance for Christians in recovery, including “Amazing Grace,” “Abide With

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<sup>295</sup> Sister Thea Bowman, “The Gift of African American Sacred Song,” *Lead Me, Guide Me: The African American Catholic Hymnal* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 1987) 7.

Me,” “Sometimes By Step,” among a number of others. This last song, by Rich Mullins, has become one of the standard hymns and a kind of theme song for Step By Step. In our services we use only this section of the song, its chorus:

### **Sometimes by Step**

Oh God, You are my God  
And I will ever praise You  
Oh God, You are my God  
And I will ever praise You

I will seek You in the morning  
And I will learn to walk in Your ways  
And step by step You'll lead me  
And I will follow You all of my days

I will seek You in the morning  
And I will learn to walk in Your ways  
And step by step You'll lead me  
And I will follow You all of my days<sup>296</sup>

Worthy of deeper reflection is the tendency on the part of one of our musicians to select hymns and songs with wonderfully catchy tunes and reprises that have rather grim texts. One particularly good example is the hymn “I’ll Fly Away,” which has the following lyrics.

### **I’ll Fly Away**

Some glad morning when this life is over, I’ll fly away;  
To a home on God’s celestial shore, I’ll fly away (I’ll fly away).

#### *Chorus*

I’ll fly away, Oh Glory  
I’ll fly away; (in the morning)  
When I die, Hallelujah, by and by,  
I’ll fly away (I’ll fly away).  
When the shadows of this life have gone, I’ll fly away;  
Like a bird from prison bars has flown, I’ll fly away (I’ll fly away).

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<sup>296</sup> Rich Mullins, “Sometimes By Step,” <http://www.christianlyricsonline.com/artists/rich-mullins/sometimes-by-step.html>. Accessed 10/12/06.



*Chorus*

I'll fly away, Oh Glory  
I'll fly away; (in the morning)  
When I die, Hallelujah, by and by,  
I'll fly away (I'll fly away).  
Just a few more weary days and then, I'll fly away;  
To a land where joy shall never end, I'll fly away (I'll fly away).

*Chorus*

I'll fly away, Oh Glory  
I'll fly away; (in the morning)  
When I die, Hallelujah, by and by,  
I'll fly away (I'll fly away).

The message of rewards and peace to be found in the hereafter strikes me as particularly troublesome for people in recovery, who, as discussed in Chapter Two, need to focus on “living in the now,” on acceptance and dealing with reality, rather than projecting onto the future, or Heaven, solutions to today’s problems. When a hymn has a tune and some lyrics (“I’ll fly away, Oh Glory”) that are so infectious, it is tempting to keep using the hymn despite its message. It is also worth recognizing that a hymn like this has been used by oppressed peoples to offer hope (see James Cone’s *The Spirituals and the Blues*) in the face of sometimes dire life circumstances from which there may have been no escape—until the end of life on this earth and the time to “fly away... to a land where joy shall never end.” A better answer might be to find a way to write some new lyrics for this tune that embrace recovery rather than eschatology.

This brings me to one of my dreams for the past number of years: to have a hymn specifically written for Step By Step. This dream became a reality in the course of this project when I had the inspiration to set to music an adaptation of Reinhold Niebuhr’s long version of the Serenity Prayer, which Step By Step already uses as its standard Call

to Worship. The tune came to me quite suddenly and I adapted the Prayer within a matter of hours into a new hymn, “God, Grant Us the Serenity.”

The new hymn is set to the tune *St. Anne*, which is now almost universally associated with “Our God, Our Help in Ages Past,” considered the second-most popular hymn in England and regularly sung at funerals and times of mourning. The tune, while stately, is far from funereal, however, but it is exceedingly well known, an important consideration for Step By Step in seeking hymns and songs that are easily sung by worshippers who may not be able to read music or read it well and will be singing in small groups that may have no strong singers.

Interestingly, the tune *St. Anne* was not used for *O God, Our Help in Ages Past* until the publication of *Hymns Ancient and Modern* in 1861. Before that, it had been set to the tune *Hanover*. Meanwhile, the tune *St. Anne* first appeared in the 1708 edition of Tate and Brady’s book of psalm tunes, where it was set to Psalm 42 (‘As pants the hart for cooling streams’). The tune is believed to have been composed by (and is widely attributed to) Dr. William Croft (1678-1727), who served a series of posts as organist of *St. Anne’s Church, Soho, the Chapel Royal, and Westminster Abbey*.<sup>297</sup>

In adding “God, Grant Us the Serenity,” or for that matter any new hymn, Step By Step kept in mind a valuable insight, that “if a congregation is unsure of its ability to handle new music, a good place to begin might be with new texts set to familiar melodies. This enhances the congregation’s confidence while exposing them to new texts, with their new images, metaphors, and phrases.”<sup>298</sup>

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<sup>297</sup> Ian Bradley, ed., *The Book of Hymns* (New York: Testament Books, 1989), 336

<sup>298</sup> “Developing a Congregation’s Hymn Repertoire,” Faithstreams... Light for the Journey, <http://www.faithstreams.com/ME2/Sites/dirmod.as> Accessed 1/20/07.

**GOD, GRANT US THE SERENITY**

1. God, grant us the day Ser-en-ity To-ac-  
 2. Liv-ing each this sin-ful at world-as is, En-Not  
 3. Tak-ing we have can't mom-ent; be, Cour-Ac-Trust-

age cept-ing to ing You change hard-will the ship make things as all we the things can, way right, And To When

Wis-dom and Your to live will dis- your cern. Peace. bend.

4. Then reason'bly happy shall we be  
 In this our time on earth,  
 Supremely happy in the next,  
 Where in God's love we'll dwell.

5. God, grant us the Serenity  
 Acceptance, Courage, Wisd'm  
 Your will not ours, let it be done  
 Help us accept Your love. Amen.

## **Experimenting with Step By Step's Forms and Settings**

As referenced throughout this chapter, one of this project's goals was to develop alternative forms and settings of worship for Step By Step by experimenting with the formats of Step By Step's worship services, and initiating at least one new setting for Step By Step services. Until this project began, Step By Step had been following a particular format for worship in two settings, without substantial change, for approximately four years.

### ***Introducing New Elements of Worship***

Over the course of this demonstration project, we changed various elements of worship, introducing several new and different elements and forms—including hymns, new musicians and musical instruments, and a new creed. Drawing on Pentecostal traditions, we reintroduced testimonies into worship (last used intentionally by Dr. Annie Ruth Powell in 2000-2001), as discussed earlier in this chapter.

With the unreliability of an available piano in Lampman Chapel at Union, we concluded that we would have to take a different direction if we wanted musical accompaniment for our services there. An opportunity arose when a change in our Minister of Music's schedule made it impossible for him to play at our services. We decided to look for a guitarist because of the portability of the instrument and its popular use in less-formal worship services, such as our is. We

found our first guitarist among the student body at Union, Mr. Jason Ferris, who plays at the Union and MCC services. Another Union student, Ms. Susan Ketchin, joined Mr. Ferris to play duets from time to time or to substitute for him and eventually became the sole Minister of Music for the Riverside Church service. At Middle Collegiate Church, a member of the congregation, Ms. Kate Whitney, a pianist, was enlisted to become the Minister of Music for that service, and has since assumed that role at Metropolitan Community Church as well.

Each of our new Music Ministers bring their own gifts to the ministry in terms of tastes in music. Mr. Ferris prefers traditional and modern folk songs such as Bob Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind" and traditional sacred music of rural America. Ms. Ketchin plays a variety of music but especially traditional church hymns like "Amazing Grace" or "Sweet, Sweet Spirit." Ms. Whitney has brought a passion for songs that evoke the "old-time religion" and one nineteenth-century Evangelical hymn we have played several times has wonderful resonance for recovery, "Throw Out the Lifeline." To add a few more notes to our earlier discussion of the use of hymnody in Step By Step, let us look at the lyrics of this hymn:

**Throw Out the Lifeline<sup>299</sup>**

Throw out the lifeline across the dark wave;  
There is a brother whom someone should save;

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<sup>299</sup> Edwin S. Ufford, "Throw Out the Life-Line," Timeless Truths Free Online Library, [http://library.timelesstruths.org/music/Throw\\_Out\\_the\\_Lifeline/](http://library.timelesstruths.org/music/Throw_Out_the_Lifeline/). Accessed 12/10/06.

Somebody's brother! Oh, who then will dare  
To throw out the lifeline, his peril to share?

Refrain:

Throw out the lifeline! Throw out the lifeline!  
Someone is drifting away;  
Throw out the lifeline! Throw out the lifeline!  
Someone is sinking today.

Throw out the lifeline with hand quick and strong:  
Why do you tarry, why linger so long?  
See! he is sinking; oh, hasten today  
And out with the life boat! Away, then, away!

Throw out the lifeline to danger-fraught men,  
Sinking in anguish where you've never been;  
Winds of temptation and billows of woe  
Will soon hurl them out where the dark waters flow.

Soon will the season of rescue be o'er,  
Soon will they drift to eternity's shore;  
Haste, then, my brother, no time for delay,  
But throw out the lifeline and save them today.

This is the lifeline, oh, tempest-tossed men,  
Baffled by waves of temptation and sin;  
Wild winds of passion, your strength cannot brave,  
But Jesus is mighty, and Jesus can save.

Jesus is able! To you who are driv'n  
Farther and farther from God and from Heav'n,  
Helpless and hopeless, o'erwhelmed by the wave,  
We throw out the lifeline—'tis, "Jesus can save."

This is the lifeline, oh, grasp it today!  
See, you are recklessly drifting away;  
Voices in warning, shout over the wave,  
Oh, grasp the strong lifeline, for Jesus can save.

Throw out the lifeline! Throw out the lifeline!  
Someone is drifting away;  
Throw out the lifeline! Throw out the lifeline!  
Someone is sinking today.

Richard J. Mouw calls this hymn one that embodies “nautical rescue themes in Evangelical hymnody,” representing “the call to rescue those in peril. The Christian community is seen as having been given an urgent rescue mandate.”<sup>300</sup> In Step By Step, as in all of Twelve Step recovery, one addict, one alcoholic, “throws out the lifeline” of experience, strength, and hope to help another fellow sufferer from “drifting away” and “sinking away.” We look forward to discovering and adopting many more hymns and songs, old and new, that speak to the experience of recovering in God and Christ. As Mouw states, hymns like this help us “to understand our own mandate—as persons who have ourselves been rescued from... terrors—as a call to throw out lifelines and to keep lit the lights along the shore.”<sup>301</sup>

A final element added to our worship was a Step By Step “creed”—our current Preamble—which is based on the Alcoholics Anonymous Preamble, and we have been experimenting with its use in different services.

#### Step By Step Preamble

Step By Step is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from addictions, compulsions and destructive behaviors, attitudes, and relationships and to support those whose relatives and friends struggle with these issues. The only requirement for membership is a desire for

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<sup>300</sup> Richard J. Mouw, “‘Some Poor Sailor, Tempest Tossed’: Nautical Rescue Themes in Evangelical Hymnody,” *Wonderful Words of Life: Hymns in American Protestant History and Theology*, ed. Richard J. Mouw and Mark A. Noll (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 236.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid, 250.



recovery using the Twelve Steps as spiritual tools. Step By Step has no dues or fees; we are self-supporting through our own contributions. Step By Step is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organization or institution; does not wish to engage in any controversy, neither endorses nor opposes any causes. Our primary purpose is to stay clean, sober, and abstinent from destructive behaviors, attitudes, and relationships and to support others in their journeys of recovery.

It remains to be seen if the theology and practice of Step By Step are completely consonant with this Preamble, which must be considered a work in progress. One question is whether in fact “the only requirement for membership a desire for recovery using the Twelve Steps as spiritual tools.” If this is a Christian fellowship—as it quite intentionally is—is Christian confession a requirement? Without having discussed this with my co-leaders, I would have to say no, that we practice an open communion at Step By Step and all are welcome regardless of their beliefs or lack thereof.

Another question is whether Step By Step can reasonably consider itself non-denominational, it is in fact allied with several religious groups and bodies: Union Theological Seminary (historically tied to the Presbyterian Church and one of the “historically related seminaries” of the United Church of Christ), The Riverside Church (which is affiliated with the American Baptist Churches and the United Church of Christ), Metropolitan Community Church (of the United Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches), and Middle Collegiate Church (of the Reformed Church in America and the Collegiate Dutch Reformed Church Corporation of New York).

All this being said, there have been no complaints or comments from leaders or members of Step By Step about the Preamble as yet.

### **Launching Step By Step in New Sites**

This project has sought to expand Step By Step from its two sites in the belief that this ministry has a much wider potential audience. As described Chapter Five on understanding our congregation, the primary sites for Step By Step are at Union Theological Seminary in Morningside Heights and Metropolitan Community Church in the Clinton section of Manhattan, a few steps away from the tunnels through which vehicles enter and exit from the Lincoln Tunnel. Neither site is particularly convenient or attractive to people living elsewhere in the city. The blocks on which Union and MCC are situated lack pedestrian traffic in the evenings when services are held and lack a warm neighborhood feel—Union’s block surrounded by major edifices of educational and religious institutions and MCC surrounded by industrial buildings, the tunnel accesses, a hotel, and a gas station. What would happen if Step By Step were offered in a location where there was more of a neighborhood feel?

From January 2006 through the summer of 2006, I researched a variety of possible new sites for a third monthly Step By Step service in a different venue—such as another church, a secular setting, or another educational or institutional setting. In June, we launched a new Step By Step service in the first new site, The Riverside Church, and in October, we launched Step By Step in its second new

site, Middle Collegiate Church. I was delighted that Riverside chose to adopt Step By Step, and documentation of the process through which this happened follows in Appendix B. Because Riverside did not meet the criteria for a site with strong neighborhood connection as well as Middle Church did, the following section will focus more extensively on the process leading to the introduction of Step By Step at Middle Collegiate Church.

### **Outreach to Manhattan Churches**

We began the process of seeking new sites by considering where a recovery ministry take root and flourish. A likely audience for Step By Step would seem to be churches that already had some familiarity with Twelve Step groups. For this project, our student intern, Ms. Carrie Brunken (who had the title of Student Minister in Step By Step and is now one of the Co-Ministers), as part of her field education work at Union Theological Seminary, compiled a list of all churches in the Borough of Manhattan, New York City, that serve as hosts for Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. This list was compiled using the A.A. New York Inter-Group meeting list of A.A. meetings in Manhattan. These churches, totaling 117, were contacted to identify a pastor or other contact person and each church was sent the following letter:

**STEP BY STEP  
A MINISTRY OF RECOVERY AND HEALING  
C/O NEW YORK THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY  
475 RIVERSIDE DRIVE, SUITE 500  
NEW YORK, NY 10115**

March 2006

Dear Colleague in Ministry,

I am writing to introduce you to a special ministry that I hope you and members of your congregation may find helpful and of interest. Step By Step is a Christian ministry that uses the Twelve Steps of the recovery movement (developed by Alcoholics Anonymous more than 70 years ago and followed by many other Twelve Step fellowships in the years since) in a program of worship. We currently meet twice a month on Tuesday evenings in two sites and are hoping to expand to additional sites in the months ahead. Step By Step was founded in 2000 by the late Rev. Dr. Annie Ruth Powell, Seminary Pastor of Union Theological Seminary, and I continued this important work after Dr. Powell's passing in 2001. We are now in our sixth year of ministry to people struggling with addictions, compulsions, and unhealthy behaviors, attitudes, and relationships. In monthly worship services and weekly meetings, we combine Christian belief and worship with Twelve Step spirituality. Our services include prayer, sacred music, scripture, preaching, and personal testimony by congregants on issues of living as Christians in recovery. Members of all Twelve Step programs are especially welcome, and we also welcome any who would simply like to learn more about the Twelve Steps as tools for spiritual growth and development. Ours is an inclusive ministry, with services open to all, and people from a wide diversity of backgrounds have found renewal in our ministry. Attendance at these meetings, and what is shared there, is confidential. Finally, Step By Step sees one of its primary roles as providing a bridge or gateway from the rooms of Twelve Step recovery into the church sanctuary, and vice versa. While Tuesday night Step By Step worship services may serve as a destination for some, they are also help acquaint others with Christian worship or with the tools of Twelve Step recovery.

I have enclosed a few copies of our current flyer for Step By Step and invite you to share this information with members of your congregation or community who you feel might benefit from our ministry. We have found that in addition to sharing copies with particular congregants, posting a flyer on your community

announcements bulletin board or including a notice in your worship bulletin provides a way to let people know about this resource in a way that permits them to keep their interest private and confidential. Since I know that you host Twelve Step meetings in your church, a public posting of this flyer would be a way of sharing pertinent information with the recovery community in your midst. I would welcome the opportunity to speak with you further about Step By Step and would also be happy to offer a Step By Step workshop for your congregation on a Sunday after worship or a weekday evening to give a chance for folks to experience this unique worship program first-hand. And if any members of your congregation would like to know more about our ministry or about recovery issues in general, please feel free to refer them to me at 212-870-1218 or pb@nyts.edu.

Grace and peace,

The Rev. Paul Bradley (U.C.C.)  
Minister, Step By Step

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This mailing resulted in four telephone conversations with church representatives who called the author to ask questions about Step By Step and one invitation from the Rev. Fanny Erickson, Minister for Membership and Parish Life of The Riverside Church, to introduce Step By Step as a new program of the church's Wellness Center. The Riverside Church began offering Step By Step in its first new site in June 2006.

Beginning in January 2006, I began reaching out to clergy of Middle Collegiate Church, located in the East Village of New York City. I targeted Middle Church because of its location in a vibrant and changing neighborhood, the East Village of Manhattan, an area with a widely varied population of various

ages, races, ethnicities, and sexual orientations. Middle Church also is the host to “East Village,” one of the largest special interest groups with Alcoholics Anonymous for LGBT people, which might provide a built-in potential source of congregants for Step By Step in the same site. Finally, through my acquaintance with the Minister for Congregational Life, the Rev. Freeman Palmer, I knew that there were a number of people in recovery and others who might be in need of a ministry of recovery in the congregation. It was ripe territory for evangelism of our ministry.

After series of telephone conversations, e-mail exchanges, and two face-to-face meetings with Rev. Palmer and the Senior Minister, the Rev. Dr. Jacqueline Lewis, we came to an agreement in the late summer of 2006 to start a new Step By Step ministry at Middle Church and to launch that ministry in a special recovery-oriented Sunday worship service. Middle Church has two identical Sunday services at 9:00 and 11:15 a.m. and the liturgy that follows later in this chapter was used at both services. In the weeks leading up to the service, the following outreach and publicity was done by Middle Church to publicize the new ministry. The wording for these materials was developed by Rev. Palmer and the Director of Communications, Scott Cocking, in consultation with me. The liturgy of the service also reflected a collaborative effort among the clergy, music director, and myself.

To promote the service, clergy began announcing Step By Step during the two Sunday worship services in the weeks leading up to the launching of Step By Step. An article on the ministry appeared in *Middle Notes*, the church's monthly newsletter, which is mailed to all church members and a wide mailing list of past visitors and friends of Middle Church.

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## **Middle Notes**

**The Newsletter of Middle Collegiate Church**  
**[www.middlechurch.org](http://www.middlechurch.org) OCTOBER 2006**

### ***Step By Step Ministry Comes to Middle***

Beginning Monday, October 23, Step By Step, a small group ministry for all people striving for spiritual wholeness, will have a ministry at Middle Church. Step By Step integrates the tools of the Twelve-Step Recovery Movement developed by Alcoholics Anonymous with Christian principles, practice, and worship. In monthly workshops and worship services, Step By Step offers doorways to freedom from compulsive, destructive, and addictive behaviors and attitudes that prevent us from reaching our fullest potential as beloved and loving children of God. Step By Step's ministry crosses the boundaries of all addictions and all compulsions, using the wealth of wisdom offered by many different Twelve-Step programs to help people deal with problems such as overeating and anorexia, problem drinking, gambling, drug use, spending and debt, sexual compulsion, rage, and unhealthy dependent relationships. A program of Union Theological Seminary, Step By Step was established in 2000 through the vision of the late Rev. Dr. Annie Ruth Powell, Union's Seminary Pastor, and continues under the co-direction of the Rev. Paul Bradley, Ms. Sophia Pazos, and Ms. Carrie Brunken, Co-Ministers. Step By Step will begin at Middle Church on Monday, October 23, at 7:00 PM, and will continue with a

monthly meeting and worship the fourth Monday of each month. For further information about Step By Step, please contact **Freeman Palmer**, Minister for Congregational Life and Development, 212-477-0666 or **[fpalmer@middlechurch.org](mailto:fpalmer@middlechurch.org)**.

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Finally, the following paid advertisement was placed in the Middle Church bulletin, the *Gay City News*, a city-wide newspaper aimed at the LGBT community, and the *Villager*, a Greenwich Village/East Village neighborhood paper (the original version was strikingly printed on a black background with white dropout type).



# MIDDLE COLLEGIATE CHURCH

*Welcoming. Artistic. Inclusive. Bold.*

## DOING A BOLD NEW THING ON EARTH

**Step By Step Ministry**  
**A new Small Group Spiritual Service**  
**For those in recovery**

Monday | October 23 | 7 PM

### **Worship Celebration**

Sundays | 9:00 am | 11:15 am

### **SoulCare**

Wednesdays | 7:30 pm

**Visit us at 2nd Ave. @ 7th St.**

Find out more about us at [Middlechurch.org](http://Middlechurch.org)

Following is the full text (with the exception of several nonpertinent announcements and the text of the sermon for the day (of which I was not able to obtain a copy), of the recovery service that Middle Church presented on the Sunday before Step By Step was launched, to lift up themes of recovery and promote the new ministry at Middle Church.

**Middle Collegiate Church Recovery Service<sup>302</sup>**

SUNDAY WORSHIP CELEBRATION  
October 22, 2006 9:00AM, 11:15AM

**\* GATHERING \***

8:30, 10:30 a.m.      Familiar Hymns, Songs and Spirituals

PRELUDE      *Prelude for Organ*      Virgil Thomson

INTROIT      *This is the Day that the Lord Hath Made*  
Charles Brown

This is the day (this is the day),  
That the Lord hath made (that the Lord hath made),  
I will rejoice (I will rejoice),  
And be glad in it (and be glad in it)  
This is the day that the Lord hath made,  
I will rejoice and be glad in it!  
This is the day (this is the day),  
That the Lord hath made.

HYMN      *Glory, Glory Hallelujah*      (*The New Century Hymnal*)

PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING  
(Congregational response in Bold)      Led by the Rev. Paul Bradley,

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<sup>302</sup> Content adapted from Sunday Church Bulletin, October 22, 2006, Middle Collegiate Church, New York, NY. Sources for additional liturgical elements noted in separate footnotes.

New York Theological Seminary

Good morning, Middle Church! Let's join together in the Prayer of Thanksgiving.

God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things which should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.

**God's will, not ours, be done.**

Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time, accepting hardship as a pathway to peace.

**God's will, not ours, be done.**

Taking this sinful world as it is, not as we would have it, trusting that You will make all things right, if we surrender to Your will.

**God's will, not ours, be done.**

So that we may be reasonably happy in this life, and supremely happy with You forever in the next.

**God's will, not ours, be done. Amen.**

(Based on the Serenity Prayer [long version] by Reinhold Niebuhr)

ANTHEM      *My Shepherd will Supply My Need*      Virgil Thomson

My Shepherd will supply my need:  
Jehovah is His Name;  
In pastures fresh He makes me feed,  
Beside the living stream.  
He brings my wandering spirit back  
When I forsake His ways,  
And leads me, for His mercy's sake,  
In paths of truth and grace.

When I walk through the shades of death  
His presence is my stay;  
One word of His supporting grace  
Drives all my fears away.  
His hand, in sight of all my foes,  
Doth still my table spread;  
My cup with blessings overflows,  
His oil anoints my head.

The sure provisions of my God

Attend me all my days;  
O may Thy house be my abode,  
And all my work be praise.  
There would I find a settled rest,  
While others go and come;  
No more a stranger, nor a guest,  
But like a child at home.

(an adaptation of Psalm 23)

\*\*\*\*\*Worshippers May be Seated\*\*\*\*\*

#### WELCOME / ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Rev. Dr. Jacqui Lewis

...Tomorrow, Monday, October 23 begins Step By Step, a ministry based on 12 Step programs. Here to speak about this small-group ministry is Rev. Paul Bradley, Vice President for Development and Institutional Advancement of New York Theological Seminary.

#### INTRODUCTION TO STEP BY STEP

Paul Bradley

I'm so honored and delighted to be with you this morning. And I'm very grateful to Jacqui Lewis and Freeman Palmer for extending such a warm welcome to me. I want to start by bringing greetings from New York Theological Seminary, and also from the Step By Step Ministry. In Step By Step, we incorporate the Twelve Steps and other tools of Alcoholics Anonymous and other recovery programs into a small-group Christian worship service. Our services include sharing, prayer, singing, and a message that uses both Holy Scripture and wisdom from the recovery movement. We've been offering this ministry in a few locations farther uptown for about six years now. And I have great news: Step By Step is coming to Middle Church! Starting tomorrow night, Monday, October 23, at 7:00, and every fourth Monday after that, we'll be holding Step By Step here at Middle Church. Everyone is welcome at Step By Step—people in recovery from any addiction or compulsion like drinking or drugging or overeating or gambling, or anyone in a relationship with someone with an addiction or compulsion. And people not in recovery but who would like to learn how the spiritual tools of the recovery movement might help them improve their conscious contact with God are welcome too. It's a confidential and safe space for you to share and begin healing. I'll be around after the service to answer any questions you may have. I also have some flyers for you to take with you or share with friends and family members. We hope you can join us tomorrow night!

#### MOMENT FOR MISSION

Lyn Pentecost (9:00)

Ruth Gonzales (11:15)

MORNING PRAYER<sup>303</sup>

The Rev. Freeman Palmer

God, we come to you with grateful for the opportunity to come. We are grateful that when we come to you, you welcome us with open arms as we are, with our joys, with our sorrows, with our burdens, with our rejoicings, with our cares, with our fears, and with our faith. We come to you Holy one, as we are, longing for the wholeness that comes from you. There is much we can ask for, God. There is much that we need. There is much that that our city needs. There is much this country needs. There is much this worlds needs. And we ask that you meet the needs wherever they are, as only you can know them, as only you can meet them. Yes today, as we focus on recovery and healing, we ask again for that which we have prayed before:

- For the serenity to accept the things we cannot change.
- God, this acknowledges that we are human beings.
- And there are things in this life that are simply beyond our control.
- We can't control the body aches and pains and illnesses that come with age.
- We can't change the fact that people we love become ill and pass away.
- We can't control the fact that our job was eliminated months ago.
- Lord, we can't even affect the outcome of a game with our favorite team.
- So God, we need your serenity, we need your peace. We long and pray for the ability to rest in you, and find that peace that surpasses all understanding. Lord, there are things, as much as we'd like to, we cannot change, so grant us the serenity so that we may be at peace with them and with you.
- Yet God, we ask that you grant us the courage to change the things we can. For there are things we can change. There is much we can do.
- We can reach out in forgiveness and in faith to restore that broken relationship.
- We can be a source of strength and encouragement to one another.
- We can be change agents for love, for peace, for welcome, for justice, for reconciliation, near and far.
- God, enable us by your spirit to do for ourselves, for one another, and for all creation, exceedingly and abundantly above all we ask or think, according to the power at work with us. Lord, send your power, and give us courage to boldly go forth, change the way things are, and bring about your reign on this earth as it is in heaven
- Lastly, grant us the wisdom to know the difference.
- This is a prayer for guidance.
- This is a prayer for discernment.

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<sup>303</sup> Freeman Palmer, "Morning Prayer," Middle Collegiate Church, October 22, 2006.

- This is a prayer for clarity.
- God for it is in both action and contemplation where we find the hidden wholeness that unites and energizes us, where we find you as the source and power that make us whole and fully alive.
- Lord, walk with us. Talk with us. Help us to be in community with each other and in communion with you.
- So that we might know your will, for ourselves, for our church, for our community, for our world, in that knowledge, know the difference, and make a difference.
- God, serenity, courage, wisdom, is our prayer this day. In thanksgiving and trust, and faith, we say Amen.

THE LORD'S PRAYER /  
PASSING THE PEACE

The Rev. Freeman Palmer

(Alternative) Ever-loving God, Hallowed be your name. Your reign come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for yours is the reign, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

\* REFLECTING \*

SCRIPTURE READING

*Isaiah 53:1-6*

Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account. Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

CHORAL RESPONSE

*Fix Me, Jesus*

arr. Hal Jonnson

Solo: Kristin Sampson

SERMON

*"A Healing Foretold"*

The Rev. Morine Bowen

\* RESPONDING \*

OFFERING/  
OFFERTORY

*Changed!*

Walter Hawkins

Solo: Gail Blache-Gill

\* DOXOLOGY HYMN

From all that dwell below the skies / Let faith and hope with love arise. Let peace,  
goodwill on earth be sung / Through every land, by every tongue.

DEDICATION PRAYER

The Rev. Paul Bradley

All good gifts around us come from you, O God.  
You have given us life and new life in Christ.  
As you have given us gifts, so we offer our gifts  
That we may be gifts to one another,  
Even as Jesus so taught and lived.

May these gifts bring light to those who walk in darkness,  
Hope to those who live in despair,  
And justice to those who are oppressed.  
Grant to each giver a sense of participation in the most important opportunity of all time:  
To share your love with the world.  
To this end, we dedicate our offerings and ourselves.  
Amen.

CLOSING HYMN *When Peace, Like A River (It Is Well with My Soul)*

(The New Century Hymnal)

When peace, like a river, upholds me each day,  
When sorrows like sea billows roll;  
Whatever my lot, You have taught me to say,  
“It is well, it is well, with my soul.”

*Refrain*

It is well, with my soul,  
It is well, with my soul,  
It is well, it is well, with my soul.

Though evil should tempt me, though trials should come,  
Let this blest assurance control,  
That Christ has regarded my helpless estate,  
And hath shed His own blood for my soul.

*Refrain*

My sin, oh, the bliss of this glorious thought!  
My sin, not in part but the whole,  
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more,  
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

*Refrain*

O God, speed the day that is filled with your light,  
When clouds are rolled back as a scroll;

The trumpet shall sound, and the Lord shall appear,  
“Even so, it is well with my soul.”

*Refrain*

\*BENEDICTION

\* ALL WHO ARE ABLE ARE ASKED TO STAND

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WELCOME TO MIDDLE CHURCH! We are glad you are with us today. If you are visiting for the first time, we invite you to come back often and make Middle Church a home place for you, your family, friends and companions. To receive our newsletter, or for information on joining our congregation, please fill out the pew card in front of you or sign either the guest book in the narthex or the clip board in the fellowship hall. There is a table for everyone at MIDDLELINK! Come and fellowship with family and friends. Guests and Family are invited to have a cup of coffee on us!

MIDDLE CHURCH CHOIR is directed by Jonathan Dudley  
Gail Blache-Gill, Charles Brown, Beth Hatton, Joslyn King, Eric Lamp, Nedra Neal,  
Mark Rehnstrom, Kristin Sampson, Pamela Warrick-Smith, Branch Woodman

\*\*\*\*\*

The following Step By Step informational brochure was distributed at Coffee  
Hour at 10:00 and MiddleLink Friendship Gathering in Social Hall following the 11:15  
worship service:





Welcoming • Artistic • Inclusive • Bold

## NOW YOU CAN EXPLORE THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSION OF YOUR RECOVERY IN A SPECIALLY STRUCTURED WORSHIP

Part of recovery is healing. Part of healing is getting in touch with your spiritual side. This worship was designed to meet your unique spiritual needs.

It is a nondenominational service incorporating the steps and lessons from your 12 step group into a special service focused on coming together with others like you to help each other heal using prayer, meditation and worship.

This worship is now at Middle Church. So, come, join in and heal your spiritual self.

**Fourth Monday of every month at 7 PM**

**(Except December, Third Monday!)**

Next dates | Oct 23 | Nov 27 | Dec 18 | Jan. 22 | Feb. 26 | Mar. 26 | Apr. 23 | May 21

**For more information:**

**Rev. Paul Bradley**—Co-Minister of Step by Step

212.870.1218 | [pb@nyts.edu](mailto:pb@nyts.edu)

**Rev. Freeman Palmer**—Minster, Congregational Life and Development

212.477.0666 | [fpalmer@middlechurch.org](mailto:fpalmer@middlechurch.org)

*Step By Step offers doorways to freedom from compulsive, destructive, and addictive behaviors, attitudes, and relationships—such as alcoholism, drug addiction, debting, eating disorders, sexual compulsion, codependence, gambling, and rage in a monthly worship setting.*

*Middle Collegiate Church is a celebrating, culturally diverse, inclusive and growing community of faith where all persons are welcomed just as they are as they walk through the door.*

This service provided a first test of a hoped-for means of expanding Step By Step into new forms—the development of a “Recovery Sunday” or “Recovery Day” program for a church that might or might not be the host of a new Step By Step meeting. The model presented above was geared at presenting the spiritual tools of Twelve Step recovery to members of a worshipping congregation with the aim of providing information and tools for people struggling with their own issues of addiction and compulsion and those who have loved ones who face such struggles.

On the following day, we launched Step By Step at Middle Collegiate Church, meeting in the same third-floor room where the “East Village” group of A.A. meets. Entering the space to begin setting it up, I reflected on the many times over the past 16 years I had sat in that room, crowded with 75-100 alcoholics in recovery, listening to people sharing their experience, strength, and hope in recovering from alcoholism and addiction, and sometimes sharing my own. Now as I took my recovery journey to another stage, I felt a sense of coming full circle, returning to one of the sacred sites of the A.A. program to introduce a new dimension of recovery resources perhaps to some of the same people with whom I had sat in that room over the years.

The format of the meeting followed that outlined earlier in this chapter, with a few differences. We added a reading of the Step By Step Preamble, and in addition to inviting the Rev. Freeman Palmer to deliver the Invocation, we also invited him to offer words of welcome on behalf of Middle Collegiate Church. We had an embarrassment of riches that night—normally, in its other settings, Step By Step had attracted six to twelve people, but usually around eight. On our first night at Middle Church, we had a group of 25! The size of the group led me to adapt my worship plans for the evening. With a

group of 25 and a commitment to the congregation and to Middle Church to keep the service within a 75-minute parameter, I turned the usually open-ended Check-in into a more focused time of sharing where I invited each member to introduce her or himself and state in a word or two how they were feeling. Carrie Brunken read the scripture for the evening, and I preached a sermon on the First Step.

To illustrate how scripture and Twelve Step recovery can come together in a sermon, I include the sermon on the First Step I preached at Step By Step at Middle Collegiate Church:

**“In Our Weakness Is Our Strength”  
Sermon on Step One  
Step By Step  
October 22, 2006**

**The Rev. Paul Bradley  
Middle Collegiate Church**

**2 Corinthians 12 5b-10**

“On my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’ So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.”

**Step One**

“We admitted we were powerless over addictive, compulsive, and destructive behaviors, attitudes and relationships—that our lives had become unmanageable.”

In his Second letter to the Corinthians (12:9), Paul tells us that “power is made perfect in weakness.” Sometimes this line is translated as “my strength is made perfect in

weakness.” This leads us to the title of my reflection for tonight, “In our weakness is our strength.” This central message of our Christian faith is also central to our very survival as alcoholics and addicts in recovery from addictions, compulsions, and destructive behaviors, attitudes, and relationships. It starts with Step One. We admit our powerlessness over these substances, these behaviors, these attitudes, these relationships that demonize us and bedevil us, that drag us down, that destroy our spirit, our lives, our very essence. We say, God, I am weak. I am power-less.

A few lines earlier, Paul describes how we can be boastful, we can feel elated, but to keep us from ever being too elated, we’re given thorns in our flesh, messages from Satan, visitations from our demons. And we pray to God to have our thorns leave us, to be freed of our demons. Paul appeals to God three times and God responds that God’s grace is sufficient, that power is made perfect in weakness. In order for the spirit of God to dwell in us, for us to be filled with Christ, we need to be weak. It’s that paradox of our relationship with God, and it’s the paradox of addiction and recovery. In order to have the strength to live without our demonizing influences, we have to let go absolutely, we have to surrender all and let God’s love fill us and flood us and work in us. Transform us. In weakness we find strength. At the moment we hit bottom, when we say, we are powerless and can’t do it by ourselves anymore, that is the moment of greatest strength.

I remember the moment of my intervention when I hit bottom after acting out at work, being drunk on the job and then calling in sick for a week afterward. When I came back to an intervention by my boss and was sent to our Employee Assistance Program counselor, that wonderful therapist told me what sounded horrible at the time but was said in such comforting tones, “someday you’ll look back on this as the moment you hit

bottom.” What I didn’t understand is that from the bottom, we start to go up. And now nearly fourteen years after that day and with nearly that many days of continuous sobriety behind me and with me, I can see how far down I had gone and what a journey going “up” can be—a journey with no limit when you let go and let God do for you what you cannot do for yourself.

We need bread for this journey, our journey of recovery. Spiritual bread, practical bread, sustenance of mind, body, spirit. We need to learn how to take care of ourselves, sometimes for the very first time. I didn’t know how to eat properly when I first stopped using. I had binged and purged—an eating disorder was part of the manifestation of my disease of compulsion—so I had to learn to eat healthy foods in moderate portions at regular intervals. I ate too much sometimes and had to learn how to eat less and remain satisfied and not feel deprived. I had to embrace my weaknesses, as Paul tells us we must. I had to practice acceptance. So we need to feed ourselves, and not just in a physical sense. We need spiritual sustenance as well. We need a spiritual life, a spiritual discipline. When many of us come into AA or other Twelve Step programs, we often feel spiritually bankrupt, at least at first. We need to recognize the Higher Power at work in our lives and begin to practice spiritual disciplines, whatever form they take. We start praying, maybe only at meetings. We begin to practice meditation in some form to center ourselves and find the places of peace and tranquility we need to begin to be comfortable in our own skins. We need the tools of recovery as found in the Twelve Steps, the slogans, and program literature and related recovery writing such as the AA Big Book, *Hope and Recovery* from SCA, *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* of AA or OA,

Patrick Carnes' great book, *A Gentle Path through the Twelve Steps* or David Crawford's *Easing the Ache*.

We supplement the spiritual disciplines we learn in Twelve Step recovery by becoming part of a faith community, a worshipping group. That could be a local church. We might start going to the church for NA meetings in its basement. Maybe one day we go upstairs into the sanctuary and attend a Sunday service. Our faith community can be Step By Step, here at Middle Collegiate, or one of our other sites, at Union Seminary, or Riverside Church, or MCC. We might become active in another religion, another spiritual tradition. We enrich our spiritual life through the scripture, tradition, liturgy, music, hymns, prayers, of a faith community. We open as many doorways and windows in our hearts, minds, and souls to let God's love and light flood into our lives and turn our weakness into strength. The paradox and miracle of faith, and of recovery, is the more we open ourselves to God's will, the greater is our power to do good, and the more joy and fulfillment we feel. So let's join Paul in boasting of our weaknesses, our wounded places, our imperfections, for those are the places that we can open for God to work wonders in our lives.

### **Beyond Step By Step: Growing a Twelve Step Christian Recovery Ministry**

This demonstration project has sought to expand the reach of a variety of models of Twelve Step Christian recovery ministry beyond the scope of Step By Step based on the learning gained in conducting this ministry over the past seven years. Step By Step's experience has been of a growing number of small group, house-church-like worship meetings. This experience has produced a wealth of insight and many practical tools—liturgies, prayers, a creed, hymns, religious rituals, sermons, and other materials suitable

and adaptable to many settings beyond the small-group-ministry model. In the course of this project, these “Recovering In Christ” materials have been used, beyond Step By Step, in a “Pan-Twelve-Step” Step study meeting; a Recovery and Spirituality workshop at an Alcoholics Anonymous conference; and, in two “Recovery Sunday” worship services at two different churches, one of which has been presented in this chapter.

### **The Step By Step Twelve Step Study Group**

Before the formal launch of this project, Step By Step initiated an anonymous Twelve Step meeting offered during lunch hour on Wednesdays in Lampman Chapel at Union Theological Seminary throughout the Seminary’s academic year. Not a worship service but a traditional recovery meeting, the Step By Step Twelve Step Study Group is offered as “the program of all Twelve Step programs,” open to any and all in recovery or desiring to use the tools and Steps of recovery. The flyer lists several of the programs whose members Step By Step hopes to reach out to, including Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, Al-Anon, Codependents Anonymous (CODA), Sexual Compulsives Anonymous, Adult Children of Alcoholics, Debtors Anonymous. Ms. Kellie Anderson-Picallo is the leader of this group.

The Step Study group opens with the Serenity Prayer, the Step By Step Preamble (see above), followed by a reading of the short synopsis of the Step for the week from the Alcoholics Anonymous “Twelve and Twelve” or a reading from another piece of recovery literature.

In his book *Upon This Rock: The Miracles of a Black Church*, Samuel Freedman states that “To rebuild oneself was to rebuild the community, and to rebuild the

community was to rebuild oneself.”<sup>304</sup> The purpose of Step By Step’s Twelve Step Study meeting is to do precisely what Freedman describes: for members to rebuild themselves by sharing their vulnerability and brokenness in a community of like-minded, sympathetic, comrades. Members are rebuilt personally through their experience of each member’s personal shared confessions and the nature of the *koinonia* experience of being in community with fellow strivers on the journey of recovery. This small community, which ebbs and flows, is built and rebuilt through members’ sharing of their struggles—of what the program calls their “experience, strength, and hope.” And by committing to be that community, we build and rebuild our community and thereby rebuild one another. Each time, members are “doing a new thing”—creating that elusive “program of all programs”—and the feeling of transformation is palpable, powerful, and empowering.

### **Reaching Out to the Wider Recovery Community**

Following is one final piece of documentation of some of the ways we have taken the tools of Christian recovery developed in Step By Step and used them in wider settings. In the fall of 2005, at the “Night Light Beginners” meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous, I signed up on a sheet inviting volunteers to lead workshops at an upcoming annual A.A. conference to be held in the spring called Manhattan Share-A-Day. The day consists of a series of workshops on topics of relevance and interest to people in recovery. Thinking of a wonderful opportunity to put some of Step By Step learning into practice with a group of alcoholics, I wrote that I would be willing to lead a workshop on

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<sup>304</sup> Samuel G. Freedman, *Upon This Rock: The Miracles of a Black Church* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 319.



“recovery and spirituality.” I was contacted by one of the organizers and asked to lead the workshop. I prepared the following outline, from which I spoke and led a question-and-answer session.

One might ask why there would be any need to “remind” people in recovery about spirituality. The fact is, people in Twelve-Step groups often focus on the practical details of recovery (which are critical, like not picking up the first drink and avoiding “people, places and things”) and short-change its essential spiritual nature—without which, the work of recovery can be quite difficult. Do we want to walk alone or with God? I took this opportunity not to proselytize Step By Step, which in a “spiritual” but not “religious” setting would not have been appropriate, but to illuminate some of the many excellent spiritual resources available for people in recovery to use, either from Twelve Step literature or from other traditions and faith practices. Approximately fifty people attended the workshop, which was very well received. Afterward, ten attendees gave me their e-mail addresses to be added to my e-mail list for further information about spirituality and recovery.

**Presentation of spiritual tools to an A.A. conference workshop in Manhattan,  
March 18, 2006:**

“Spirituality and Recovery”

Outline for an Oral Workshop Presentation  
by the Rev. Paul Bradley (“Paul B.”)  
to Alcoholics Anonymous Southeast New York Region, Manhattan District

“Manhattan Share-A-Day”  
Washington Irving High School  
Saturday, March 18, 2006  
11:00 a.m.-12:30 p.m.

Overview

Introduction: Brief personal introduction and qualification as alcoholic and addict in recovery since 1991. Story of my own spiritual awakening at Riverside Church in 1992 after doing my Fourth and Fifth Step with my sponsor on Thanksgiving weekend.

1. A.A./Twelve Step Recovery: A spiritual program of recovery. Not therapy, not a self-help program, not a religion, but a spiritual program. “The spiritual life is not a theory. We have to live it.” (p. 83, Big Book) And from “How It Works,” (pp 58-60, Big Book): “No one among us has been able to maintain anything like perfect adherence to these principles. We are not saints. The point is, that we are willing to grow along *spiritual* lines. The principles we have set down are guides to progress. We claim *spiritual* progress rather than *spiritual* perfection.” (p. 60, Big Book, italics added).

2. The Higher Power in A.A. experience and practice:

- Bill W.’s experience of a spiritual awakening from *The Grapevine*:  
“It is the intention of *The Grapevine* to carry occasional accounts of spiritual experiences. To this interesting project I would like to say a few introductory words. There is a very natural tendency to set apart those experiences or awakenings which happen to be sudden, spectacular or vision-producing. Therefore any recital of such cases always produces mixed reactions. Some will say, ‘I wish I could have an experience like that!’ Others, feeling that this whole business is too far out on the mystic limb for them, or maybe hallucinatory after all, will say, ‘I just can’t buy this business. I can’t understand what these people are talking about.’

As most AAs have heard, I was the recipient in 1934 of a tremendous mystic experience or ‘illumination.’ It was accompanied by a sense of intense white light, by a sudden gift of faith in the goodness of God, and by a profound conviction of His presence. At first it was very natural for me to feel that this experience staked me out for somebody very special.

But as I now look back upon this tremendous event, I can only feel very specially grateful. It now seems clear that the only special feature of my experience was its electric suddenness and the overwhelming and immediate conviction that it carried to me.

In all other respects, however, I am sure that my own experience was not in the least different than that received by every AA member who has strenuously practiced our recovery program.

How often do we sit in AA meetings and hear the speaker declare, ‘But I haven’t yet got the spiritual angle.’ Prior to this statement, he had described a miracle of transformation which had occurred in him—not only his release from alcohol, but a complete change in his whole attitude toward life and the living of it. It is apparent to nearly everyone else present that he has received a great gift; and that this gift was all out of proportion to anything that might be expected from simple AA activity, such as the admission of alcoholism and the practice of Step Twelve. So we in the audience smile and say to ourselves, ‘Well, that guy is just reeking with the spiritual angle—except that he doesn’t seem to know it yet!’ We well know that this questioning individual will tell us six months or a year hence that he has found faith in God.

Moreover he may by then be displaying ‘spiritual qualities’ and a performance that I myself have never been able to duplicate—my sudden spiritual experience notwithstanding.

So nowadays when AAs come to me, hoping to find out how one comes by those sudden experiences, I simply tell them in all probability that they have had one just as good—and that theirs is identical excepting it has been strung out over a longer period of time.

Then I go on to say that if their transformation in AA extending over six months had been condensed into six minutes—well, they then might have seen the stars too!

In consequence of these observations I fail to see any great difference between the sudden experiences and the more gradual ones—they are certainly all of the same piece. And there is one sure test of them all: ‘By their fruits, ye shall know them.’

This is why I think we should question no one’s transformation—whether it be sudden or gradual. Nor should we demand anyone’s special type for ourselves, because our own experience suggests that we are apt to receive whatever may be the most useful for our needs.<sup>305</sup>

The Steps are filled with references to our Higher Power and God. Let’s review the Steps that talk about God and “H.P.”:

- Step Two: “Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.”
- Step Three: “Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him [God].”

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<sup>305</sup> Bill W., The A.A. Grapevine, Inc., July 1962.

- Step Five: “Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.”
- Step Six: “Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.”
- Step Seven: “Humbly asked Him [God] to remove our shortcomings.”
- Step Eleven: “Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His [God’s] will for us and the power to carry that out.”
- Step Twelve: Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.”

How do we practice our spirituality, how do we get in touch with our Higher Power and understand God’s will for us. Let’s look at some of the types of spiritual practice that A.A. literature mentions (you can add your own to this list):

- Prayer
  - Kinds of prayer:
    - Serenity Prayer  
*God, grant me the serenity  
 To accept the things I cannot change  
 Courage to change the things I can  
 And Wisdom to know the difference.  
 Some people add: Thy will, not mine, be done!*
    - Third Step Prayer  
*“God, I offer myself to Thee/You—to build with me and to do with me as Thou wilt/You will. Relieve me of the bondage of self, that I may better do Thy/Your will. Take away my difficulties, that victory over them may bear witness to those I would help of Thy/Your Power, Thy/Your Love, and Thy/Your Way of life. May I do Thy/Your will always!”*<sup>306</sup> (p. 63, Big Book)
    - Fourth Step Amends Prayer in a particular situation, when “people who wronged us were perhaps spiritually sick” (p. 66, Big Book):  
*“This is a sick man. How can I be helpful to him? God save me from being angry. Thy will be done.”*
    - Sixth to Seventh Step Prayer  
*“My Creator, I am now willing that you should have all of me, good and bad. I pray that you now remove from me every single*

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<sup>306</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 67.

*defect of character which stands in the way of my usefulness to you and my fellows. Grant me strength, as I go out from here, to do your bidding. Amen.”*<sup>307</sup>

- Tenth Step Short Prayer<sup>308</sup>
  - “How best can I serve Thee/You—Thy/Your will (not mine) be done.”
  - St. Francis of Assisi Prayer
  - Lord’s Prayer
  - As Step Eleven in 12 and 12 suggests, end all prayers of petition with “... if it be Thy/Your will.”<sup>309</sup>
- Meditation
  - Yoga
  - Eleventh Step meditation meetings
  - Movement
  - Ta’i Chi
  - Dance
  - Spiritual journaling/spiritual writing
  - Walking, running
  - Exercise
  - Labyrinth meditations
  - Chanting, repeating mantras
  - Silence
  - Spiritual readings
  - Use of *Daily Meditations* and 24 Hour books
  - For some great suggestions for exploring your own personal spiritual development, Patrick Carnes has these recommendations:<sup>310</sup>
    - Keeping a Dream Journal
    - Finding a Seeking Place (Time)
    - Develop a Guiding Metaphor
    - Build a Collection of Sacred Things
    - Find a Spiritual Mentor

Some final thoughts about spirituality in recovery from Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham and their wonderful book about A.A. and Spirituality called *The Spirituality of Imperfection*:

“At meetings, in the process of telling their own stories and listening to the stories of others, A.A. members begin to live out the discoveries... [ of recovery, and] they find that

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<sup>307</sup> Ibid, 76.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid, 85.

<sup>309</sup> Ibid, 102.

<sup>310</sup> Patrick Carnes, *A Gentle Path Through the Twelve Steps*, p279-280.

certain experiences flow from them—Release, Gratitude, Humility, Tolerance, Forgiveness, and Being-at-home. These experiences share this in common—they cannot be commanded. We do not call them forth when we want them: they become available to us when we need them, *if we are available to them*.”<sup>311</sup>

This presentation was followed with open question-and-answer and sharing session about these and other techniques for spiritual growth used by group members.

### **Other Intended Goals of the Demonstration Project**

One of the goals of the project was to experiment with the intentional use of the sacraments of Communion. We intend to do this in Step By Step in the next months and have recently touched on this area of liturgy, with two Co-Ministers, Sophia Pazos and myself, leading communion at Metropolitan Community Church of New York’s “Miracle of Recovery Sunday” 7:00 p.m. service on January 21, 2007. The service, documented in Appendix D, was one of three worship services offered that day at MCCNY, all with recovery themes and all featuring leadership in a variety of roles by Step By Step leaders.

The liturgy for Holy Communion for that evening was adapted from an order developed by a group of United Church of Christ pastors after 9/11, and follows:

#### **Miracle of Recovery Sunday at MCC New York Communion Liturgy<sup>312</sup>**

##### ***The Invitation to the Table***

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<sup>311</sup> Ketcham and Kurtz, *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, 159.

<sup>312</sup> Based on a liturgy first used in a United Church of Christ Partners in Education event, Scottsdale, Arizona in February 2004, from <http://www.ucc.org/worship/witgf/resources/communion/hc5.pdf>. Accessed 1/21/07.

O God of power, O God of peace, God of healing, who feeds the hungry, calms the storm, and comforts the trembling, call your children into your arms. Call your children to this table.

L: God is with you

**And also is with you.**

L: Let us open our hearts

**We open them to God**

L: Let us give God thanks and praise

**It is good and joyful thing to do**

***The Great Thanksgiving***

O God, who changed chaos into creation,  
you know the trembling hearts of your children:  
Adam hiding, naked,  
Eve exiled, no way to return  
Sarah childless and jealous,  
Hagar abandoned to die,  
Moses stuttering before Pharaoh,  
Daniel thrown to lions,  
David facing the giant Goliath,  
Esther petitioning the king,  
To all, you comforted, delivered, and inspired.  
God, you still small voice,  
God, you tranquil waters,  
you, mother's embrace,  
you, father's strong arm,  
you, prophet's voice,  
you, nurse's touch,  
you, child's faith,  
you, the Spirit of the rooms of recovery,  
you, peace beyond all understanding,  
you, perfect love in whom there is no fear,  
no terror, no despair, no death,  
God, You are hope.  
Holy One, we bless you.  
Holy God, Holy Three, we thank you!

*"Holy, Holy, Holy!"*

Holy, holy, holy.  
My heart, my heart adores you!  
My heart knows how to say to you:  
You are holy, Lord!

Santo, santo, santo.  
Mi corazon te adora!  
Mi corazon te sabe decir:  
Santo eres, Dios!

To a fearful world, you sent your child Jesus.  
You announced his coming to Mary and shepherds  
with angels singing: "Be not afraid."  
Jesus came among us, taught,  
healed, saved, and confronted.  
And troubled minds eased, turbulent seas quieted,  
children rested, followers transformed,  
while rulers were thrown into turmoil.

When Jesus ate with his friends,  
He took bread, and after blessing it,  
He broke it and gave it to them saying:  
"Take, eat; this is my body given for you.  
Each time you do this, remember me."  
Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks,  
Passed it to his friends, saying:  
"Drink. This cup poured out for you  
is the promise of God, made in my blood.  
Whenever you drink it, remember me."  
We remember Jesus' death and resurrection, our hope.  
We recall all these mighty acts.  
We break bread and share one cup.  
We pray for a fearful world.

Powerful and Peaceful God,  
breathe your Spirit upon us  
and on these gifts,  
that all who eat and drink at this table  
may be one body, one holy people,  
a bold and faithful people,  
a living sacrifice in Jesus Christ.  
Through Christ, with Christ, and in Christ,  
One with the Holy Spirit,  
All glory is yours everywhere, now and forever.  
At this time, in the silence, we also remember  
all those who suffer and are in pain



those with addictions and compulsions  
those without work  
those ravaged by war  
those weary and unsure of life  
those who live with fear, oppression, or hunger,  
those who long for your peace, love, and justice.

***Prayer of Our Savior***

In the peace and presence of the Holy Spirit, we pray the prayer of Jesus, our brother, savior, and friend . . .

*Lord's Prayer*

***The Breaking Bread and Pouring Wine***

*Pastor breaks the loaf:*

Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body.  
The bread we break is a sharing in the body of Christ and the brokenness  
of our siblings throughout this city and this troubled world.

*(pouring or lifting the cup)*

The cup over which we give thanks is our sharing in the life of Christ.  
Christ is present.

L: Here at MCC New York as in all MCCs around the world we practice an open communion which means you don't have to be a member of this church or any other church to partake of God's gifts. The Gifts of God for all the People of God. Behold, all is ready. Come and be fed.

Another hoped-for goal of this project, which was eliminated on the recommendation of my Site Team in the summer of 2006 because of the magnitude of other work being done in the project, was designing and offering a Step By Step retreat. Prior to the beginning of this project, I successfully planned and led one such retreat for The Riverside Church (documented in Appendix D), and am working with one of Step By Step's regular members and guest preachers, Brendan Fay, to develop a new retreat for the summer of 2007, outside the scope of this project but in keeping with the continued expansion of offerings of the proposed Resource Center for Recovery Ministries.

Other questions that were not able to be resolved in the course of this demonstration project, which need to be addressed in the future, include whether Step By Step can baptize its members and by which method; whether Christian recovery weddings/commitment services and funerals appropriate and what liturgies should they use; and whether Step By Step can and should Step By Step ordain its ministers.

All of this leads to the question of what model of ministry informs and guides Step By Step—whether it is a church and, if so, what kind of church, or if it perhaps is closer to a chaplaincy, a mission, or a movement. These questions will be addressed in the Conclusion, which proposes a bold next step for the Step By Step Recovery Ministry. Before we close, however, we have one critical last piece of investigation to report, our study of Step By Step’s Congregation in Chapter Five.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **OUR CURRENT AND POTENTIAL CONGREGATION: LEARNING ABOUT THE RELIGIOUS PRACTICES OF PEOPLE IN RECOVERY AND THEIR ATTITUDES ABOUT CHRISTIAN TWELVE STEP RECOVERY MINISTRY**

#### **Introduction**

Analyzing the settings of Step By Step is a necessary stage in understanding its congregation. A site tour of Step By Step's primary location was conducted and analyzed. Another important step in preparing to launch an expanded Twelve Step Christian recovery ministry was undertaking a study to determine whether there might be interest by people in recovery in participating in such a ministry and what qualities the ministry would need to have to attract these participants. It also was important to try to gather feedback from past and current participants in Step By Step and other Christian recovery ministries to determine what people like and feel that works, what they like less, and why they "keep coming back" or, conversely, have stopped attending.

#### **Step By Step's Setting**

Avery Dulles' series of models for the church provide useful lenses for understanding its identity. Step By Step might be described as a combination fellowship, servant, and prophetic congregation/ministry.<sup>313</sup> The fellowship of recovery is at the heart of "how it works"—one recovering person helping another, discovering that where self-will was useless, the power of two in fellowship, in the presence of God, leads to radical transformation. It is a servant church because its purpose is to serve the needs of

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<sup>313</sup> Dulles, Avery, *Models of the Church* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974).

people struggling with addictions, compulsions, and the negative effects of these, including destructive relationships. Each member is a servant to each other, peer-led and peer-guided, with the leaders of the ministry being “trusted servants” as well, peers among peers. Finally, Step By Step is a prophetic movement because it preaches and practices a radical message of inclusion and transformation.

### **Step By Step’s Local Ecologies**

In its seven years of operation, Step By Step has attracted a broad cross-section of people representing a variety of recovery issues and a range of backgrounds. Attendees have included people from within the Union Theological Seminary and Metropolitan Community Church communities (and in the past year, from The Riverside Church and Middle Collegiate Church) and from the outside—lay, clergy, and seminarians, and include African Americans, Asian Americans, Latino(a)s, and European-American/Caucasians. Approximately one-third of attendees are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT). Group leadership is split between LGBT people and heterosexuals.

Some attendees are active in their addictions and compulsions and others are in recovery. Some have no issues from which they are seeking recovery but appreciate the format of the ministry and the tools of the Twelve Steps. Particularly over the years, people suffering from depression but not dealing with a particular addiction/compulsion have found refuge and support in Step By Step. Some attendees are likely still in denial about various aspects of their diseases. Among the recovery issues confronting participants are alcoholism, drug addiction, eating disorders from overeating to anorexia

and bulimia, spending and debting issues, and family and relationship issues. Several members are adult children of alcoholics/addicts and of these some have also been in relationships with active alcoholics/addicts. Based on attendance and the presence of people dealing with multiple issues surrounding addictions and compulsions, the mission of Step By Step appears to be being fulfilled, albeit on a fairly modest scale in terms of total numbers of people attending, as Step By Step remains a small-group ministry along the lines of its Methodist roots, rarely drawing a group of twenty and usually gathering eight to twelve attendees for a service.

The social analysis tools of Nancy L. Eisland and R. Stephen Warner<sup>314</sup> provide a helpful lens for examining the geography, chronology, demographic, cultural, and organizational layers of the community(ies) in which the Step By Step Ministry is located, and insight into the visibility and invisibility of community members—to discern and identify who is marginalized or excluded and explore what role, if any, Step By Step might be able to play in their lives. There are possibilities for increasing Step By Step’s outreach within its immediate geographic location in Morningside Heights, a different approach than currently used, except in terms of the outreach to members of the Union Theological Seminary community. Although currently Step By Step reaches out to the wider recovery community throughout the City, Step By Step has not yet targeted people in recovery or interested in recovery within, for instance, a ten-block radius from Union, and has not done such targeted outreach around the neighborhood of Metropolitan Community Church of New York in the Clinton section of Manhattan.

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<sup>314</sup> Eisland, Nancy and R. Stephen Warner, “Ecology: Seeing the Congregation in Context,” *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1998).

The Step By Step Recovery Ministry has overlaying ecologies that are local, city-wide, and national. At the beginning of this demonstration project, Step By Step was conducting evening and weekday services in Lampman Chapel at Union Theological Seminary at Broadway and 121st Street in the Morningside Heights neighborhood of Manhattan in New York City and at Metropolitan Community Church of New York. The following pages provide a social analysis of one setting, Union Theological Seminary, selected by virtue of the fact that it serves as the sponsor and host of the overall Step By Step Recovery Ministry.

At Union, the congregation of Step By Step includes students, faculty, and staff from Union, people from the neighborhood, and people from a wider geographic range that includes New York City and its surrounding suburbs. Core members of this small group ministry include myself, as Co-Minister, a resident of the Upper West Side of Manhattan, living approximately one mile south of the Union campus. Another regular member lives five blocks from me. Several regular members are resident students on the Union campus at 3041 Broadway (a campus bordered by 120th and 122nd Streets and Claremont Avenue and Broadway. Many services have guest preachers, some of whom also are regular members of the congregation. Preachers in the past several years have come from: Fort Washington, Harlem, the Upper West Side, and Chelsea in the Borough of Manhattan, New York; several neighborhoods of Brooklyn, New York; Mount Vernon and Mamaroneck in Westchester County, New York; Paterson, Princeton, and Ridgefield, New Jersey; Pasadena, California; and Cambridge, England.

In general, and probably in large part because of its location on the Union Seminary campus and the widest advertising taking place there, until the beginning of

this demonstration project in 2006 and the launching of new sites, the majority of members of Step By Step have tended to be members of the Union Seminary community. Therefore this survey sets an arbitrary boundary that reflects a normative reality for most members of the Union community: the region bounded by 110<sup>th</sup> Street on the south, Morningside Drive and Amsterdam Avenue on the east, 125<sup>th</sup> Street on the north, and Riverside Park to the west.

It is certainly true that many members of the Union community venture beyond these borders regularly, including virtually all of the staff and nearly half of the student body that is not in residence in apartments on the Seminary campus. Yet from this author's own fairly recent experience as a resident student living on the Union campus for two academic years, while living and studying at Union, most activity remained within these boundaries, where virtually everything one needed could be found. Based on many, albeit unscientific and informal, observations of the lives of other resident students, this experience seemed typical.

The region outlined above shall be designated as "Morningside Heights" for the purposes of this profile. It is a widely diverse neighborhood that is in many ways a microcosm of New York City itself. The area includes an Ivy League university, a major liberal arts college, four theological seminaries, a school of music, and graduate schools for teachers and social workers, about each of which more below. In addition, Morningside Heights holds two major cathedral churches (The Cathedral of St. John the Divine and The Riverside Church), a central headquarters for nonprofit and religious organizations (The Interchurch Center), an international youth residence (International

House), a major hospital (St. Luke's-Roosevelt Medical Center), a U.S. National Park Service national monument (Grant's Tomb), and businesses of every kind.

Residents of Morningside Heights cover the spectrum from wealth to poverty and every level in between. Some buildings on Riverside Drive are luxury residences with multi-million-dollar condominiums and cooperative apartments. For example, between Broadway and Amsterdam Avenue between 123<sup>rd</sup> and 125<sup>th</sup> Streets are the General Grant Houses, a New York City Housing Authority housing project for lower-income people. Just south of this housing project is a Mitchell-Lama middle-income cooperative residence, Morningside Gardens, and south of it are blocks of apartment buildings, some owned by Columbia University, housing students from Columbia Teachers College or the University itself.

Columbia University and the other educational institutions that cover much of the territory of Morningside Heights are a dominant force in the neighborhood. Students from the different schools—Columbia, Barnard College, the School of Social Work, Teachers College, Union Theological Seminary, New York Theological Seminary, Auburn Theological Seminary, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, Manhattan School of Music, and the Bank Street College of Education—fill the streets, along with faculty members and staff of these schools and the large number of service and maintenance workers who keep these schools running.

Demographically, Columbia, which occupies 114<sup>th</sup> to 120<sup>th</sup> Streets between Broadway and Amsterdam as well as many other sections of Morningside Heights, represents the largest population group of all the schools, appears (purely based on observation of stereotyped physical types) to be predominantly European



American/Caucasian in composition but with a visible number of minority students whose heritage appears to be Asian, of the Indian subcontinent, Hispanic/Latino/a, or African Diaspora/African American. Barnard College appears to have a similar demographic to Columbia, although it is perhaps less ethnically diverse. Jewish Theological Seminary has a Caucasian student body that is presumably almost entirely Jewish. The Manhattan School of Music is predominantly Caucasian with a significant number of students of Asian heritage and some African Diaspora and other minorities. Union Theological Seminary statistics available from the Academic Office has a student population that is approximately 80 percent Caucasian with a visible presence of students of African and Asian descent, with some Hispanic/Latino/a students.

Auburn Theological Seminary, which does not have a regular student body but offers adult education programs, appears from informal observation to attract an almost entirely Caucasian population although its staff includes African American and Hispanic/Latino/a members. New York Theological Seminary has a 90 percent minority student population (based on information gathered from NYTS' Registrar), with most students being of African descent, followed by a significant number of students of Asian descent, Hispanic/Latino/a, and Caucasian. The staff is predominantly of African descent with some Caucasian, Asian, and Hispanic/Latino/a members. The faculty is fairly evenly divided among people of African, Asian, and European descent.

Based on nonscientific observations of street pedestrian traffic at various times of day and evening and weekdays as well as weekends, residents of the neighborhood surrounding the schools break down in the following way: Riverside Drive: predominantly Caucasian; Amsterdam Avenue: mixed African American, Asian,

Caucasian, and Hispanic/Latino/a, Broadway (other than students): mixed African American, Asian, Caucasian, and Hispanic/Latino/a. Blue-collar maintenance and service workers in the schools and other organizations in the neighborhood are predominantly Hispanic/Latino/a or of African heritage. There is another population found throughout the neighborhood and residing in the area beyond Riverside Drive in the section of Riverside Park opposite Grant's Tomb: the homeless. Seen on the streets of the neighborhood throughout the day and night, they often spend time on the stoops of Teachers College, Union Theological Seminary, and Broadway Presbyterian Church, and sleep in makeshift shelters of blankets, cardboard boxes, and other coverings in the woods of the park, especially off the paved walkways and walking trails. Most homeless people appear to be of African heritage and are both men and women.

Morningside Heights gives the appearance of a thriving community offering a range and diversity of organizations and businesses that would make it possible for someone to rarely if ever have to leave the neighborhood if their work life permitted them to stay. Following is a brief inventory of the kinds of businesses and organizations located in the neighborhood:

- Banks/Financial: Eight different banking corporations, many ATMs available in schools and businesses; two check-cashing places.
- Churches: Baptist, Episcopal, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, two Roman Catholic, United Church of Christ/American Baptist Churches. Step By Step is not a traditional worship service and meets on a weeknight. Therefore, members of the Step By Step congregation are able to attend worship at neighboring churches like these or others. Union Seminary students tend to attend churches in their own denominations in New York City or the surrounding suburbs, particularly in the year of their field education placement. Every year, significant numbers of Union students attend Abyssinian Baptist Church, The Riverside Church, and Broadway Presbyterian Church.
- Entertainment: Nightclubs, bars, Columbia University Miller Theatre, music at West End Café, video rental and sale stores, music stores, bookstores (independent and connected to Bank Street College, Teachers College, Columbia University, Union Theological Seminary). The only entertainment service

lacking in Morningside Heights is a public movie theatre, although until recently there were two, now closed, within a few blocks south, and a few blocks east on 125<sup>th</sup> Street there remains the Magic Johnson cinema multiplex.

- Health: Pharmacies (independent and chain stores), physician and dentist offices advertised on signage outside buildings, health clinic, and optician. St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital Center.
- Housing: Private rental and owned apartments throughout neighborhood, possibly a few individually owned townhouses, senior housing/nursing home, group home for mentally retarded adults, single room occupancy residences throughout neighborhood, Mitchell-Lama type middle-income residence, low-income housing project, Columbia housing for students, faculty, staff, Union Seminary, Jewish Seminary, Manhattan School housing for students, faculty, staff, International House residence for visiting foreign students.
- Food: Four supermarkets, two specialty markets, coffee (two Starbucks), tea shop (Swish Café), delicatessens, bakeries, health food stores, ice cream shop, chocolate/candy store, vitamin shop. Restaurants, cafés, and diners—American, Caribbean, Chinese, Cuban, Ethiopian, Fast food (McDonalds, Subway, KFC, Taco Bell), French, Hungarian, Indian, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Mexican, Spanish. Fresh Direct food delivery service delivers in this neighborhood. Fairway, the famous gourmet market located at 130<sup>th</sup> and the West Side Highway, is outside the boundary of this survey but is regularly used by residents of the area.
- Libraries: Two New York Public Library Branches; libraries of Columbia University, Union Theological Seminary, Jewish Theological Seminary.
- Other Businesses: barber shop, botanica, boutique, jeweler, Laundromats, liquor stores, photocopying centers, salon/health spa, shoe/sneaker stores, shoe repair, stationery stores, tax accountant, travel agency,
- Post Office: One in neighborhood, several others nearby.
- Recovery Groups: Alcoholics Anonymous meets regularly at The Riverside Church, Broadway Presbyterian Church, St. John the Divine, St. Mary's (126<sup>th</sup> Street). Other Twelve Step groups, including Al-Anon, Narcotics Anonymous, and Overeaters Anonymous also hold meetings in the area. Outside the boundaries of Morningside Heights but very much part of the "recovery ecology" of the region is the 96<sup>th</sup> Street "Little Room," at the Church of the Transfiguration on 96<sup>th</sup> Street between Broadway and Amsterdam, where meetings of many different recovery fellowships are held from 6:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. every day of the week. At St Luke's, there are regular A.A. and N.A. meetings in the locked psychiatric detox/rehabilitation unit. Many Step By Step congregants also attend regular Twelve-Step meetings in their particular recovery program.
- Transportation: three subway stops, seven bus lines plus Columbia University shuttles to Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center and Lamont Geological Studies Center; parking garages, street parking.

This is a piece of the ecology of the Step By Step Ministry and highlights to opportunities for greater the outreach even to one of its immediate neighborhoods. Step By Step's outreach, which is done by e-mail and surface mail to a group of several

hundred individuals and churches, does not concentrate on the Morningside Heights neighborhood except to the Union Theological Seminary and New York Theological Seminary communities, members of The Riverside Church, and each of these because of the involvement of the principals of Step By Step in these organizations. There are many opportunities to connect with and directly serve members of this local ecology that could and should be explored.

### **Social Location**

My own social location as Minister responsible for coordinating, designing, and implementing many of the Step By Step program begins with my identity as a gay, European-American Caucasian male, from a background of privilege in a WASP family with deep roots in the history and culture of America. I am also the child and grandchild of U.C.C./Congregational ministers, and the line of ministers on my father's side goes back six generations. But I am also (and from my standpoint, first and foremost) a grateful recovering alcoholic and drug addict. Mine is a "low-bottom" story: my addictions took nearly everything away from me and nearly ended my life. I drank daily and abused prescription amphetamines, painkillers, and tranquilizers. I have also struggled with issues of sexual compulsion, with spending and debting, with food issues ranging from overeating to anorexia, and a number of other obsessions, compulsions, and self-destructive behaviors and attitudes.

My experience in active alcoholism and addiction included living near the poverty level for a number of years, not knowing where the money would come from for the next meal or the rent, all the while bearing responsibility for the care of my physically

disabled partner, who became totally dependent upon me for his survival. My sexual orientation is part of my self-definition, as a gay man finally at peace (for the most part) with my sexual identity after often denying, sometimes hiding, and usually hating this central aspect of who I was and am for the first thirty-five years of my life. I am someone who has loved deeply and suffered the unexpected death of a life partner seventeen years ago, and who has worked through the difficult and long process of grieving and eventually moving on with my life. I also bring the joy and experience after a decade of being single of living in a healthy, committed life relationship with a new partner for the past seven and a half years.

Six years into my recovery, I was finally able to respond to God's call to me to undertake a course study for ordained Christian ministry, and I entered Union Theological Seminary. I was ordained as a minister in the United Church of Christ in 2002 and currently serve, in addition to being one of the Co-Ministers of Step By Step, as a stewardship minister with the title of Vice President for Development and Institutional Advancement for New York Theological Seminary.

### **Social Location of Other Key Step By Step Personnel**

Without breaking the anonymity or any members of Step By Step's leadership team (who may or may not be in recovery from an addiction, compulsion, or destructive behavior, attitude, or relationship), following are brief identifications of names and denominational affiliations.

***The Rev. Dr. Annie Ruth Powell*** (deceased), African Methodist Episcopal Church; Seminary Pastor of Union Theological Seminary. Minister, Step By Step, 2000-2001.

***The Rev. Kristen Klein-Cecchetini***, Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (UFMCC), Associate Minister for Congregational Life, MCC of New York. Co-Minister of Step By Step, 2003-2004.

***Ms. Sophia Pazos***, C.S.W., UFMCC, Clinical Social Worker. Co-Minister of Step By Step, 2004-present.

***Ms. Carrie Brunken***, United Methodist Church, Youth Pastor, Long Island, and staff member of Hazelden New York recovery center. Student Minister, 2005-2006 and Co-Minister, 2006-present.

***Ms. Kellie Anderson-Picallo***, Presbyterian Church (USA), Auburn Media, Auburn Theological Seminary. Leader, Step By Step Twelve Step Study Group, 2004-present.

***Mr. Walter Merna***, United Church of Christ, hospital chaplain, student, New York Theological Seminary, Chaplain, Step By Step, 2006-present.

***Dr. Rachel Ann Rodriguez Bundang***, Roman Catholic, Musician, Step By Step, 2001-2003.

***Mr. Kevin Lai***, M.S.W., Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Minister of Music, Step By Step, 2003-2005.

***Mr. Jason Ferris***, Presbyterian Church (USA), student, Union Theological Seminary. Minister of Music, Step By Step, 2006-present.

***Ms. Kate Whitney***, Reformed Church in America, professional musician. Minister of Music, Step By Step, 2006-present.

***Ms. Susan Ketchin***, professional musician, student, Union Theological Seminary. Minister of Music, Step By Step, 2006-present.

### **Understanding the Populations Served by Step By Step**

To preface the analysis that follows, this study was qualitative rather than quantitative in nature, but it nonetheless produced some interesting numerical results that helped further illuminate and reinforce various subjective impressions that I and the other leaders of Step By Step have experienced about the appeal of the ministry, why some people are attracted to it, and why others feel negatively about it.

### ***Populations Studied***

To get a sense of one population to be studied through the survey, I began with the population of “people who have ever attended Step By Step,” requiring an estimate of the number of those who have attended Step By Step since its first worship service was held in April 2000. For the first four years of the ministry’s existence, there was a single Step By Step site—Union Theological Seminary—and one or occasionally two meetings per month. Attendance at these services ranged from 3 to 15 people, but generally stood at about 6-8 attendees. Following the death of Step By Step’s founder, the Rev. Dr. Annie Ruth Powell in April 2001, until October 2001, when I took over as the ministry’s leader, there was a hiatus with no meetings held. Therefore, there were seven meetings in 2000, seven meetings in 2001, and twelve meetings in 2002 (no meetings at either site in July and August but additional Step By Step workshops offered several times during the year). Beginning in September 2003, there were two sites and therefore an additional 6-8 attendees per month. There were 20 meetings in 2003 (no meetings at either site in July and August). In 2004, there were 20 meetings in the two sites and a weekly Step Study meeting was launched in September (12 meetings) with a small attendance averaging four attendees.

I needed to do another stage of analysis to ascertain what the total attendance of Step By Step has been. In each year, there has been a small core group, and other than myself, from 2001 to the present, the membership of this core has changed. For example, in 2000, Dr. Powell and three others were regulars. They repeated their attendance at every meeting and by multiplying this core number by the number of meetings and then

subtracting this figure, it is possible to determine the number of non-regular or new attendees each year. In 2001 and 2002, the Seminary Pastor (the Rev. Cari Jackson), our musician, two others, and I were regulars for a total of five plus a different guest preacher most months. In addition, in four months there were workshops with a small attendance of three or four, including myself. In 2003, these additional workshops were eliminated but a second site was added, and each site had six regulars. This consisted of myself, the Rev. Kristen Klein-Cecchetini—leader of Step By Step at Metropolitan Community Church—my Field Education intern at Union, the Step By Step musician, and two other regulars, both at Union and at MCC). In 2004, this pattern was repeated with the replacement of the Rev. Klein-Cecchetini with Ms. Sophia Pazos as the Step By Step Co-Minister at MCC.

Also in 2004, the Step By Step weekly Step study group was launched (meeting during the academic year from September-December and February-June), led by Ms. Kellie Anderson-Picallo, adding a total of about 15 attendees per month. In 2005, the previous ministries continued, although core attendance at MCC dropped to five. The core consisted of the Co-Ministers, Ms. Carrie Brunken, our student intern who had the title of Student Minister, the Minister of Music, and at MCC one and at Union two other regulars. In 2006, Carrie Brunken became our newest Co-Minister upon graduating from Union Theological Seminary, Riverside Church was added as a site in June and Middle Collegiate Church in October, adding a core at Riverside of five and a core at Middle of eight. The number of musicians increased from one to three in 2006, with usually only one serving per site. A new student intern, Mr. Walter Merna, who has the



title of Chaplain (reflecting his experience as a hospital chaplain and now charged to minister to Step By Step's congregations) joined Step By Step in November 2006.

Step By Step Total Attendance

Location	Year							TOTAL
	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	
Union Step By Step	35	50	60	75	75	75	75	430
Union Step Study or Workshop	0	15	15	0	30	120	160	340
MCC	0	0	0	30	60	50	50	190
Riverside	0	0	0	0	0	0	50	50
Middle	0	0	0	0	0	0	75	75
TOTAL	35	65	75	105	135	210	355	1,100

The chart above shows total raw attendance of Step By Step at approximately 1,000 over a seven-year period, but a more pertinent question is how many *different* people have attended Step By Step? Factoring in the core membership of each group each year while recognizing that virtually all other attendees have changed, the chart below analyzing core or repeat attendance therefore yields the answer that approximately 250 different people have attended Step By Step, in its different locations and formats, since it was founded.

### Step By Step Core or Repeat Attendance

Location	Year							TOTAL
	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	
Union Step By Step	30	30	50	65	60	60	60	365
Union Step Study or Workshop	0	15	15	0	30	120	120	300
MCC	0	0	0	12	75	60	50	197
Riverside	0	0	0	0	0	0	35	35
Middle	0	0	0	0	0	0	40	40
TOTAL	30	45	65	72	180	240	305	937

How many of these people did we have a way of reaching? There was a mailing list with postal addresses of some current and mostly former Step By Step attendees, amounting to approximately 60 names. There also was an e-mail list of past and current Step By Step attendees and others who have expressed interest in Step By Step, amounting to approximately 120 names. Contact information for the other 50 or so who have attended Step By Step was not available, so the core list of 180, or 74% of Step By Step's total attendees, provided the first population to reach with our survey.<sup>315</sup>

A first mailing of the survey, with a cover letter, was made to people on Step By Step's postal mailing list with a stamped self-addressed mailing envelope enclosed for return of the survey. This mailing resulted in only a few responses, perhaps indicating that the sample was too small to yield a meaningful response. The survey also was e-mailed as a Word attachment, with a cover letter, to Step By Step's e-mail list of

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<sup>315</sup> Postal and e-mail addresses have been gathered from Step By Step attendees and others interested in Step By Step on a voluntary basis at Step By Step services or in response to Step By Step online, e-mail, and bulletin board postings, meaning that the list is not representative of all attendees but only of attendees who have some degree of interest or willingness in continuing an association with Step By Step.

approximately 120 individuals, largely centered in the greater New York metropolitan area but also including a number of individuals elsewhere in the nation. People on the e-mail list include current and past attendees of Step By Step services and others who have expressed interest in the services at some point over the past seven years.

Additionally, Step By Step's e-mail list normally also includes the entire student body of Union Theological Seminary of approximately 325 individuals, as Union is Step By Step's sponsoring institution. Permission was requested but not granted by the Seminary's administration to include the Union student body in the survey population. As a result, only the small percentage of Union students who were already on the Step By Step e-mail list separately received the questionnaire. Overall, this e-mailing produced approximately 10 responses (and conceivably more if respondents chose to anonymize their responses by returning their questionnaire using an "alias" e-mail address rather than the address to which the questionnaire was sent). Response rates this low can best be characterized as producing a "self-selected" group of respondents, where, as Floyd J. Fowler explains, "the final sampling has little relationship to the original sampling process; those responding are essentially self-selected. It is very unlikely that such procedures will provide any credible statistics about the characteristics of the population as a whole."<sup>316</sup> Therefore, it would be difficult to assign statistical importance to these results. As discussed later, there is material of interest in the results, nonetheless.

Building on findings by Tse, who identified six advantages in conducting surveys by e-mail compared to traditional mail methods ("e-mail is cheaper, it eliminates tedious mail processes, it is faster in transmission, it is less likely to be ignored as junk mail, it

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<sup>316</sup> Floyd J. Fowler, J. *Survey Research Methods*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1993), 40.

encourages respondents to reply, and it can be construed as environmentally friendly.... The list of advantages might grow, considering the rapid development of the Internet and Web technology”)<sup>317</sup>, I extended my administration of the survey to a broad national audience of individuals connected with online and e-mail recovery-based discussion groups and listservs. To do so, I registered with a number of national online or e-mail discussion groups hosted by Google, Craigslist, Yahoo, MSN, and other organizations and posted invitations to members of the groups to participate in the survey. Groups were dedicated to the following affinity identifiers:<sup>318</sup> “Recovery,”<sup>319</sup> <sup>320</sup>“Alcoholics Anonymous,”<sup>321</sup> “Spirituality,”<sup>322</sup> “Health and Healing,”<sup>323</sup> “Religion,” “12-Step Recovery,”<sup>324</sup> “Eating Disorders,”<sup>325</sup> “Codependents Chat,”<sup>326</sup> “Addiction,”<sup>327</sup> “Just for

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<sup>317</sup> A. Tse, A., “Comparing the response rate, response speed and response quality of two methods of sending questionnaires: E-mail vs. mail,” *Journal of the Market Research Society*, 40(4), 353-361., cited in Gi Woong Yun and Craig W. Trumbo, “Comparative Response to a Survey Executed by Post, E-mail, & Web Form,” JCMC 6 (1) September 2000 Message Board, <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol6/issue1/yun.html>. Accessed 1/27/07. Yun and Trumbo report that “one of the benefits that we clearly enjoyed [by conducting surveys electronically] was a boost in the response rate, and a quicker response. A third of our responses were electronic. Had many of those respondents balked at returning the postal survey we would have had a substantially reduced response rate, or the expense of additional mailings.” This certainly seems to have been borne out by my experience.

<sup>318</sup> These are not the complete names of the groups, which usually include the name of the hosting internet organization, i.e. “google.groups.alt.recovery.” See footnotes below for domain names of actual sites where surveys were posted.

<sup>319</sup> <http://groups.google.com/group/alt.recovery.aa>

<sup>320</sup> <http://forums.newyork.craigslist.org/?forumID=12>; craigslist > discussion forums > recovery

<sup>321</sup> <http://groups.google.com/group/alcoholicsanonymous?hl=en>

<sup>322</sup> <http://forums.newyork.craigslist.org/?forumID=93>; craigslist > discussion forums > spirituality

<sup>323</sup> <http://forums.newyork.craigslist.org/?forumID=43>; craigslist > discussion forums > health & healing

<sup>324</sup> <http://groups.google.com/group/12-Step-Recovery>

<sup>325</sup> <http://forums.newyork.craigslist.org/?forumID=4508>; craigslist > discussion forums > eating disorders

<sup>326</sup> <http://groups.msn.com/Codependentschat>

Today Bulletin Board/Alcoholics Anonymous,”<sup>328</sup> “Recovering Fundamentalists,”<sup>329</sup> “Christians in Recovery,” “Don’t Debt.”<sup>330</sup> Depending on each group’s format, the survey either was made available as an attachment; as a hotlink to a posting on the “Community/General” section of Craigslist,<sup>331</sup> (with an average membership of 10,000-15,000) or incorporated directly into the copy of the post.

Respondents were invited to write to me at my personal e-mail (which was intentionally not anonymized) to receive a Word document by return e-mail if they chose not to use one of the other methods of accessing the survey. In some cases, the survey was deleted from the message board either by a group moderator or by another member, citing disagreement with the content of the survey in the context of the discussion group or violation of a rule against posting surveys. In these cases, a new posting directing interested parties to the Craigslist site and inviting them to contact the author directly was substituted. The surveys were posted and reposted over a two-week period to continue to bring them to the top of the discussion lists, where it was assumed there would be more viewings and traffic.

The number of people reached by the survey through this method can only be estimated, but based on the number of registered users on each of these fourteen discussion groups (whose membership varies from day to day and was sampled over a two-month period, November-December 2006), it is likely that as many as 20,000

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<sup>327</sup> <http://groups.google.com/group/alt.recovery.addiction>

<sup>328</sup> <http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/JFTBB>

<sup>329</sup> <http://groups.google.com/group/alt.recovery.fundamentalism>

<sup>330</sup> [dont-debt@mailman.toto.com](mailto:dont-debt@mailman.toto.com)

<sup>331</sup> <http://newyork.craigslist.org>; new york craigslist > manhattan > general community

individuals viewed the posting. In some cases, it was possible to determine the geographic location of discussion group participants from data posted directly next to their user ID or by clicking on their profiles. Several respondents indicated their location when responding to the survey. Based on this analysis, it can be reported that the participation in the discussion groups is truly nationwide, with every region of the country, including urban, suburban, and rural areas represented. It is fair to state, therefore, that the survey was made available to a nationwide audience of many thousands.

A number of individuals reading the survey invitation on various discussion boards chose not to respond to the survey but responded either to the author directly or posted a response on the discussion board indicating their (often extremely heated and negative) feelings about the subject matter of the survey, about their assumptions and presumptions about the author, or other matters. Some of these “non-responses” led to lively discussion threads extending to as many as 25 responses by a dozen or more individuals. These non-responses were, needless to say, often extremely interesting and illuminating and are included in the data compiled under the category “Comments by Non-Responders.”

Because of the anonymous and confidential nature of the Step By Step ministry and of this project, and as stated in the introductory information accompanying the survey, the names of respondents are not included in this study. All raw data including envelopes with postal origin information and all e-mails from respondents have been retained in a confidential file at New York Theological Seminary.

## Responses to the Survey

Overall, a total of 53 responses were received from these groups: the postal mailing to 60 individuals, the e-mailing to 120 individuals, and the online posting to as many as 20,000 individuals, as detailed above. The first and second groups yielded a total response of approximately 6 percent of the sample while the third group produced the remainder of the responses representing a fractional percentage of the total online population. As noted above, results at these percentiles have no significance as statistical data. It is unfortunate that the response to the first two mailings was not higher, since we have contact information for many past attendees of Step By Step (nearly 75 percent). A higher response from this group would have yielded interesting statistics about our core congregation.

Fortunately, this research was intended to be qualitative rather than quantitative, although I have numerized some of the findings. Using William M.K. Trochim's definition of data as being "*quantitative* if it is in numerical form and *qualitative* if it is not,"<sup>332</sup> I have developed a series of charts that collate the information shared by respondents, which can be found in Appendix C. Because this was a qualitative study, its purpose was to gain "an understanding of underlying reasons and motivations; to provide insights into the setting of a problem, generating ideas and/or hypotheses for later quantitative research; to uncover prevalent trends in thought and opinion.... [whose] findings are not conclusive and cannot be used to make generalizations about the

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<sup>332</sup> William M.K. Trochim, "Types of Data," Research Methods Knowledge Base, <http://socialresearchmethods.net/kb/language.php> Accessed 1/3/07.

population of interest,” but can be used to “develop an initial understanding and sound base for further decision making.”<sup>333</sup>

Although the sample used in this study was not sufficient to provide any kind of statistically meaningful results, and the response rate was so low as to qualify the respondents as “self-selected,” the results that were produced were nonetheless fascinating and provided an intriguing glimpse into a random sampling of the experiences and attitudes of a group of people in recovery and people in Christian Twelve Step groups. For example, the fact that respondents belonged to so many different recovery fellowships or movements was somewhat surprising. The quantitative data gleaned from numerizing the results, therefore, while interesting, remains secondary to the statements made by respondents to the survey. Several representative charts based on these findings are included in this chapter. Charts documenting the complete results of the survey are found in Appendix D.

### **The Cover Letter**

Dear Friend:

I am writing to ask you to consider participating in a survey that will assist me in my doctoral research for New York Theological Seminary, where I am currently studying. Enclosed is an anonymous questionnaire that I have developed to gather information for my research on the relationship between religious practice and Twelve-Step spirituality. You are not being asked to give your name for this anonymous survey. Please return this electronically and return it to me, Paul B., by e-mail at pb@nyts.edu. If you have any questions, please call me at 917-453-1094 or e-mail me at pb@nyts.edu.

By way of personal disclosure, I am a member of the fellowship of A.A. and have been sober since 1991. I have done research at the master’s level and now am pursuing doctoral work on religion, spirituality, and Twelve-Step recovery.

Many thanks in advance for your assistance.

Yours in recovery, Paul B.

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<sup>333</sup> “Qualitative vs Quantitative Research” Snap Surveys, <http://www.snapsurveys.com>. Accessed 1/4/07.



## **The Survey**

Appendix C provides the full content of the cover letters/e-mails sent to the target populations and the full eleven-page survey. Following is the central content of one of the cover letters and a summary of the primary questions on the survey:

- Which of the following Twelve Step fellowships do you currently attend or have you ever attended (including online groups)?
- Are you currently attending a Twelve Step recovery fellowship (including online groups)? If so, which one(s):
- How often do attend Twelve Step recovery meetings (including online groups)?
- Do you consider yourself to be in recovery from, or abstaining from, any addiction, compulsion, or unhealthy relationship or behavior?
- If so, can you name that or those addiction(s), compulsion(s), or unhealthy behavior(s) or relationship(s):
- If you do consider yourself to be in recovery or abstaining, how long have you been in recovery or abstaining?
- What is your formal religious background or affiliation, if any:
- What is/was your family-of-origin's religious background, if any:
- Do you currently attend religious services (at a church, synagogue, temple, etc.)?
- How often do you attend religious services?
- What is your ethnic/racial background?
- What is your gender?
- What is your sexual orientation?
- What is your age?
- Have you ever attended a Twelve-Step-based religious service?
- If so, which one(s)?
- Do you still attend a Twelve-Step religious service/recovery ministry?
- If so, which one(s)?
- If you do currently attend a Twelve-Step religious service/recovery ministry, what keeps you coming back?
- If you used to attend a Twelve-Step religious service and stopped attending, what are some of the reasons you stopped attending?
- What might a Twelve Step recovery ministry offer you that would make you interested in attending?
- Please read the Mission Statement of Step By Step, a Twelve-Step recovery ministry, below.
- Does this Mission Statement make you more interested in attending a Step By Step meeting, less interested, or does it have no effect on your opinion?

- Is there anything else about Step By Step that you would like to know that these statements have not told you?
- Please use this space (or additional sheets) to add any further questions, comments, or reactions to this questionnaire.

## Survey Results

The responses to the questionnaire produced some surprises as well as some results that might have been expected. More women than men responded and many more heterosexuals than people identifying as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer. The vast majority of respondents were European-American/Caucasian, with the second largest group being Hispanic/Latino(a). The largest age cluster among respondents was 45-49, and the majority of respondents were 40 and over.

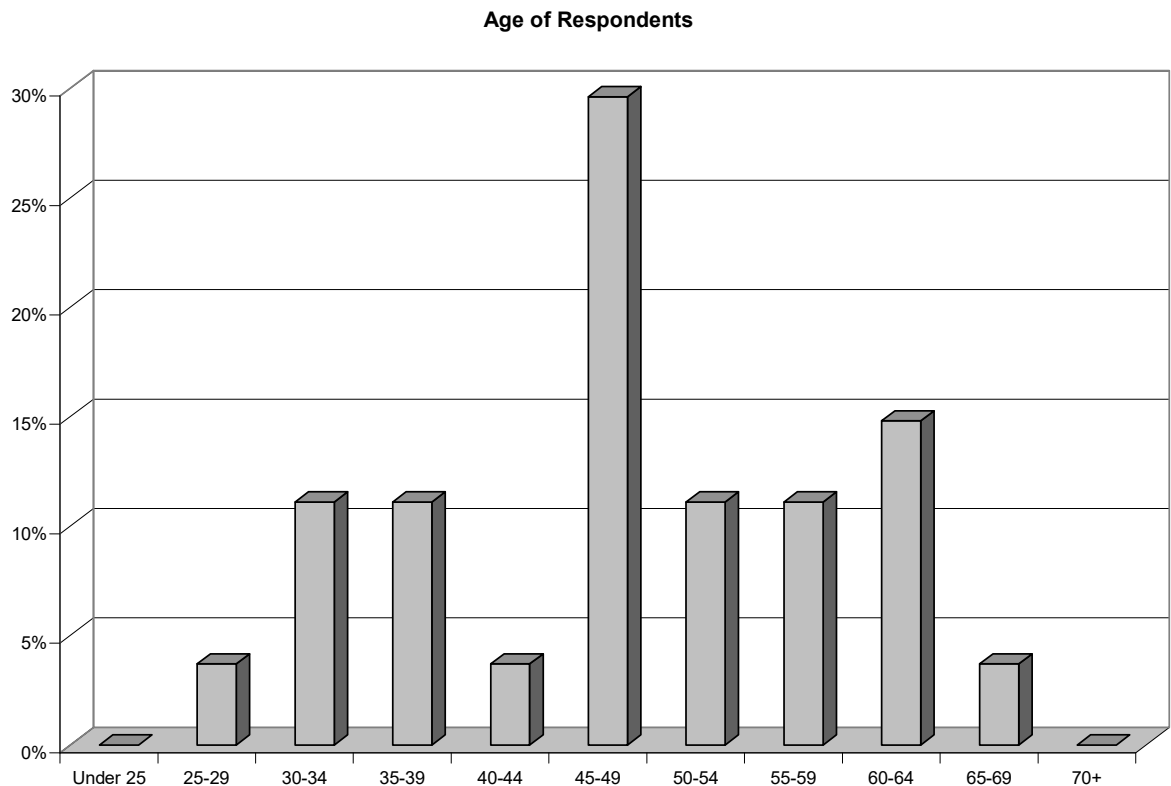


Figure 1

The current religious affiliation (if any) of respondents was spread widely among twenty different faiths, denominations, and communions, as well as agnostics, but the largest percentage, 18 percent, was Roman Catholic. The religious faith of respondents' families of origin was again spread nearly as widely as before, but a much higher percentage, 40%, came from Roman Catholic families. Of those currently affiliated with a religion, 67 percent attend worship services and of those, 71 percent worship weekly or more often.

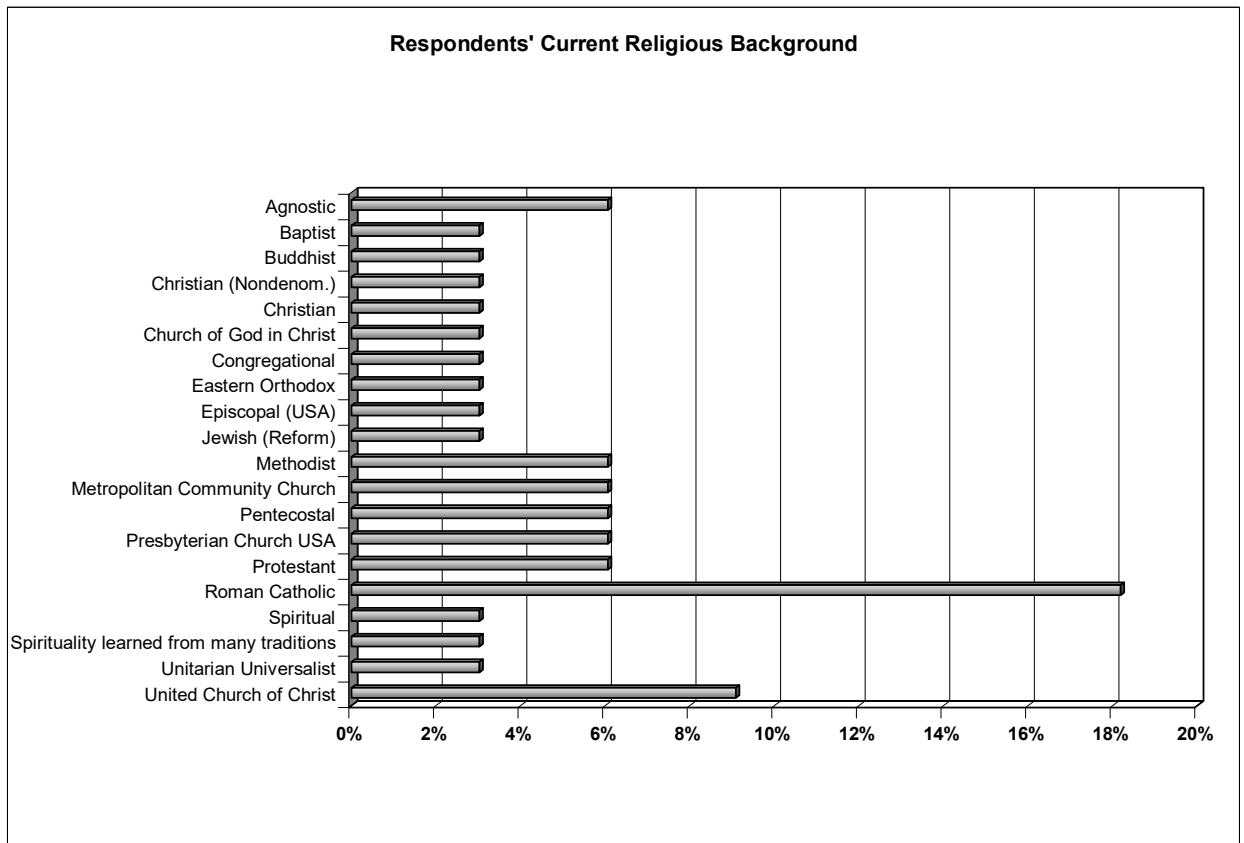


Figure 2

Long-term sobriety was one commonality among most who answered the questionnaire, with 57 percent of respondents having been sober from their primary

addiction for more than five years. Eighty-eight percent of respondents considered themselves to be in recovery, with 75 percent attending a meeting of their recovery fellowship once or week or more frequently.

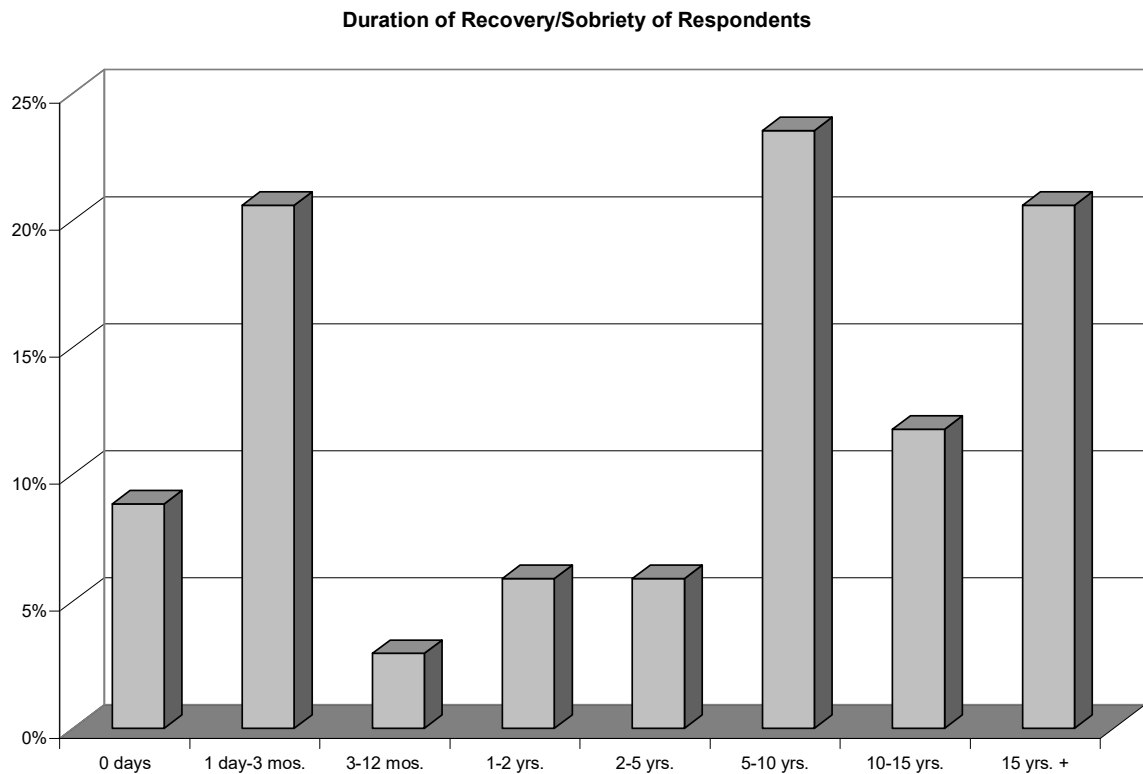


Figure 3

Respondents identified 19 different recovery groups or fellowships with which they were affiliated, the largest percentages being Alcoholics Anonymous (29 percent), Al-Anon Family Groups (15 percent), Narcotics Anonymous (12 percent), and Overeaters Anonymous (8 percent).

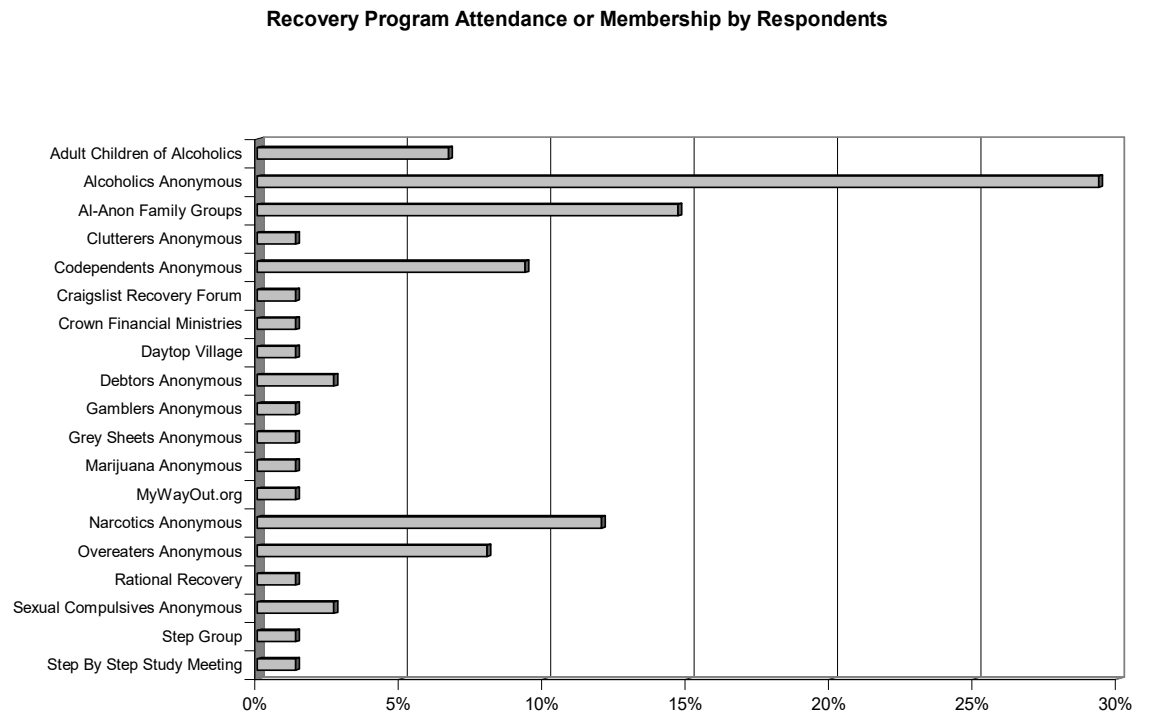


Figure 4

Forty-six percent of respondents had attended a Twelve-Step religious group, and of these, 58 percent had attended Step By Step. The complete group of figures tabulating all findings from the survey can be found in Appendix D.

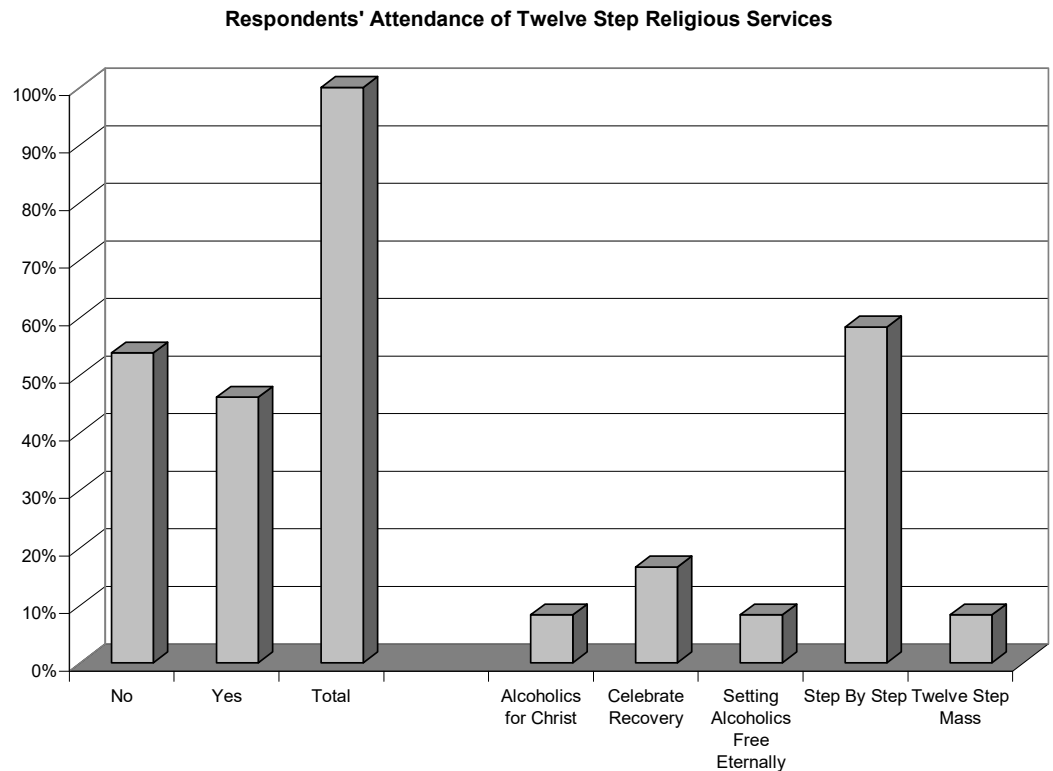


Figure 5

Of the reasons given why people continue to attend Step By Step, we found that:

- 19% liked Step By Step's integration of worship with recovery.
- 19% also felt that Step By Step offers a deeper engagement in spiritual practice than is possible in Twelve Step groups alone;
- 10% reported feeling more comfortable expressing their religious beliefs with like-minded people in recovery;
- 10% felt more comfortable expressing their recovery journey with people who share their religious beliefs or are on a similar spiritual path;
- 5% liked that Step By Step gets back to A.A.'s spiritual roots in Christianity, the original beliefs of Bill W., Dr. Bob and other early A.A.'s;
- 10% liked singing hymns and religious songs in context of recovery; and
- 29% liked incorporating Scripture from the Bible into recovery.

In addition, two respondents reported that they had stopped attending Step By Step. One did so because of the belief that Twelve Step religious practice goes against the Traditions of A.A., and the other did so because of changes in schedule.

With regard to the factors that would affect a respondents' attendance of Step By Step, 38% cited the location of meetings; 42% cited meeting times; 17% cited worship leaders, and 4% cited the style of worship. Elaborating on the last point, one respondent wrote that "I enjoy non-traditional, creative services... I am less likely to be enthusiastic if it is too formal and traditional."

### **Comments from Survey Respondents**

The most informative part of the questionnaire was the open-ended "Comments" section at the end, following the formal questions. This is section that provided us with substantial qualitative data on the opinions and concerns of Step By Step attendees and the wider recovery community.

The responses to the questionnaire were at once intriguing, challenging, often gratifying, and sometimes even annoying. The opportunity to obtain feedback from people who have been involved in Step By Step, even in relatively limited numbers, made the entire exercise well worth the effort. Responses from people who had never experienced Step By Step were generally encouraging. Even the negative responses, discussed below, provided valuable insight about ways we must be careful in presenting our ministry but also areas where our ministry might expand its outreach to offer new doorways to healing.

To my initial surprise, the responses of a number of people reading my online invitation to participate in the survey—particularly from members of Alcoholics

Anonymous but other recovery fellowships as well—was sometimes quite vehemently negative. I was tempted to respond personally to some of the statements made to me or about me, but avoided doing so unless I was asked to provide a point of clarification. For instance, someone wrote and asked if I was in recovery myself. I referred them to the statement I had made in my cover letter in which I broke my anonymity as a recovering alcoholic and addict, as a means of establishing credibility and to promote trust. This reassured the writer, who had feared that people in the online group were being “studied” by a non-alcoholic outsider, and prompted positive responses from several others on a discussion string. Other responses were less affirmative:

“I certainly reject this survey because it has nothing to do with the 12 steps or AA and it’s leading people away from the program. If I had... first come here and people were doing surveys on religion, I would have not stuck around.... Needless to say, I deleted it right away, and if I was mod[erator] of this group I would delete it from the board.... I hold the 12 steps close to my heart, because my life and others depend on it... We have to keep it simple and follow what the program suggests, we can’t start going off in this and that direction.”

One response to the preceding post had more positive note:

“I gladly took the survey for as a college student I too asked the group for [an] answer for one of my classes that dealt with a recovery topic. Why do people have to respond with such rejection and then try to bestow that rejection (and anger) on others?”

Another writer reported deleting the survey for the following reasons:

“Aren’t you really just promoting your ministry? I read the survey and filled it out. Then I got to the last page where you ask the reader to evaluate the mission statement of your ministry. I deleted the survey.... Your ‘survey’ seems more like a blatant sideways attempt to promote your own cause using the A.A. name and its members under the guise of thesis research.”

The author of this post made a few assumptions, in that nowhere in the survey did it say that Step By Step was my ministry, and there was no information offered on how or where one might find information about Step By Step. I close this set of example with the harshest of all these negative responses (*spelling and grammar not corrected*):



“I personally believe that my spiritual beliefs and concepts are non of your business. I strongly suggest you start your research by learning about 12 step recovery by reading the book, Alcoholics Anonymous. Your questionnaire would probably have significantly more relevance. ‘Mission Statement’?????? Man, keep coming back....you’ve got a lot to learn....but, leave the questionnaire for later, son...it all starts with step one.....and it aint a ‘ministry’ .....it’s a spiritual awakening, not a religious concept.....Read, son, read. Frankly, I was strongly tempted to dump your post because it would offend many....including me, but hey...I can get a resentment faster than a Jaguar can go from zero to sixty. \*sigh\* Attend an AA meeting, read the book, don’t try a questionnaire or interview until you’ve done some solid groundwork.”

I very much wanted to write back to this writer privately to clarify a few points, but he had a blocked e-mail address and responding would have required posting directly on the discussion board—which would have compromised any claim I might have had to objectivity or professional distance from my research subjects.

To allow myself to ventilate my reaction to this posting, I will briefly share a response I would have liked to make—but didn’t—to this and the others who criticized me for bringing a questionnaire about religion and recovery (as the survey was presented) to a group of people connected to Alcoholics Anonymous. It is just as well that I wasn’t able to contact him!

However, *if* I hadn’t been interested in remaining impartial, I might have written something like this: “I posted my survey and/or invitations to participate in the survey on a group of commercially owned and controlled discussion groups. While the subject matter of these groups may be Twelve Step recovery in its various forms, these ‘groups’ have no official or unofficial connection with Alcoholics Anonymous World Services or any of the other Twelve Step fellowships whose literature and recovery tools these groups use. Google, Microsoft, Craigslist, Yahoo, and the other groups sponsoring and hosting the groups where I posted my survey are, for the most part, multinational, multi-billion-dollar, for-profit entities that choose to offer these and many other special-interest

forums to the community as a way of advancing their own business interests and ultimately, I assume, their profits. For participants in the discussion groups to complain about intrusions on the purity of the purpose of their group is, I contend, quite naïve, given the context in which they are writing, under the sufferance of entities utterly removed from the core principles of A.A. or any other Twelve Step fellowship, which state quite clearly that they are “not allied with any... organization.”

Knowing that “resentment is a luxury that, as alcoholics, we cannot afford. For us, all anger is self-destructive, because it can lead us back to drinking,”<sup>334</sup> I am turning my annoyance at this anonymous “poster” over to God, however. I certainly respect the anger of this and each of the respondents at what they must have perceived as a breach of their own intra-group social contract (whether or not their groups constitute bona fide Twelve Step fellowships or not), and regret that my postings triggered such angry responses among some members. Very intentionally, I did not attempt to place the postings on the official online discussion groups and meetings of the different Twelve-Step fellowships—it would have been a violation, or at least disrespectful, of the principles and traditions of these organizations, which in all likelihood would not have allowed me to post my survey there in any case.

The negative and occasionally vitriolic responses made clear to me just how deep the suspicion of, and damage by, organized religion is among a meaningful segment of the population of people in recovery. The need to address the issues faced by survivors of religious abuse, recovering Christians (and others) is real and urgent and is something that our ministry should keep close to heart.

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<sup>334</sup> “Watching Out for Anger and Resentments,” *Living Sober* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1975), 38.

In general, the “Comments” section of the questionnaire produced many stirring affirmations of the power of the Step By Step ministry, both from those who have attended our services and those who have not yet but would like to. Here are a few of these:

“Step By Step (‘SBS’) program was very helpful and supportive to me over the Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year’s holidays since the latter two holidays fell on Mondays and that precluded meeting with my social worker and the social worker’s vacation precluded meeting on the Monday following Thanksgiving.... ‘SBS’ is also helping me by enhancing my understanding of working with recovering addicts as a chaplain.... I think that as ‘SBS’ grows, there needs to be a system in place for evaluating not only the quantitative growth but also the qualitative impact (Q2) of the program. A questionnaire of this type might be helpful in such an evaluation. I would hope that the program can be ‘grown’ not only in institutions of worship; but also in the workplace and in schools.

“A marvelous ministry grounded in recovery and hope. I hope this response leads to the continuation of Step by Step and the opportunity to worship with other Christians in celebration of recovery (while still supporting the roots of interfaith that are critical to a 12-step program).”

“I have used Step by Step as a sort of ‘exercise in supplementing my spiritual and worship experience’ because my church only has services on Sundays, and Step by Step is offered during the week.”

“I have always been a faithful person, but it was not until working the steps of the program that I began to see how I was unable to let go of my worries and fears and truly give them to God. I believed that God was good and I brought my prayers and petitions to him each day, but I didn’t see that I was still gripping my fears and worries very tightly. I felt it was my job and responsibility to worry. Living with constant drama and anxiety of loving the Alcoholic... and Addicts... in my family and struggling with my own compulsion to try to help and ‘save’ them is what finally led me toward realizing my own need to get help for myself. In time, I have come to accept my own powerlessness over others and I have learned to step back from the alcoholism and drug addiction in my family. I have learned that I have options and that I can stop working to force solutions. Al-Anon helped me to learn detachment with love. With time and practice, I have begun to unlearn the old destructive behavior patterns and establish a new role in my family. I have experienced the gift of peace and have truly felt relief in knowing that I can trust in God’s love enough to truly ‘let go’ and stop struggling for control. The mission statement sounds like something I might be interested in, so I would appreciate it if you could let me know if there are Step by Step meetings in my area.”

“Although I’m not a Christian, this is a powerful, positive, hopeful, and life-affirming program that can help many people, especially those new to recovery. The Mission Statement is obviously heartfelt, generous, compassionate, and purpose-driven. Step By

Step has tremendous outreach and growth potential and can save life. It is a welcome addition to both recovery and religious practices and principles.”

“I think the whole concept of Step By Step is awesome and I’m grateful to the hearts committed to Ministry.”

Many useful suggestions and critiques came from the Comments section. One respondent wrote, “I would have expected a question about what, if any, role religion and/or religious services has played in my recovery. Also, I am surprised that you didn’t want to know if religion was more or less important to me in recovery that it was while I was still active,” one respondent wrote, pointing out some clear shortcomings in the questionnaire we used. Another pointed out a glaring omission in the list of religions in the questionnaire: “You consider Wicca a more important choice for Religion than Hinduism followed by almost 1 billion people and the mother of Buddhism?”

“I’m a recovering addict, and my life was saved by God. I take it very seriously and just want to provide others the opportunity that I was granted by grace,” wrote a minister ordained by the Universal Light Church who is interested in starting and leading a new Step By Step branch in San Diego, writing “I have been looking for some sort of Christian fellowship to round out my recovery, but I do not want to belong to a church that is not recovery friendly.”

Some respondents found a forum to testify to their own faith and their understanding of the God found in the rooms and ministries of Twelve Step Christian recovery. One wrote:

“As a Christian, I am not a real fan of the secularized abstract recovery methods of the 12 step program in AA. I prefer to go through [celebraterecovery.com](http://celebraterecovery.com) I know many people can use AA and the 12 steps and get better but it doesn't do much for me.”

Another testified that:

“I am firmly convicted that Jesus is God and [using] the label ‘Higher Power’ is to deny truth. 12 Step ministry meetings don’t ‘dance’ around Jesus or what it is that He stands for. ‘A God of my understanding’ is denial of the Bible and the direction of God that it teaches. Picking and choosing a ‘comfortable’ God does not cut the mustard.”

A third wrote that:

“I’m interested in finding meetings and individuals who are more focused on spirituality and less centered on reaffirming addictive behaviors and challenges. Although I have not had an opportunity to attend a Step By Step religious service, I have been looking forward to integrating these services with my recovery. Most of my meetings have been on a 5 am phone bridge. I have not found these meetings spiritually enriching or satisfying. Too much time is spent on rehashing past failures and behavior instead of focusing on the first step, which reminds us that we are powerless and that God is in charge. Step By Step serves to provide the support and reinforcement I am seeking.”

One respondent distilled the Step By Step experience quite eloquently:

“I believe that the Twelve Steps are a condensed, non-doctrinal, non-narrative ‘summary’ of the Christian faith. The Twelve Step recovery program makes transparent the density and elaborate nature of the Christian narrative. It’s a good thing, making available to all people, the combination of authenticating principles of the Twelve Steps and the comfort and familiarity of the Christian story and rituals.”

One respondent did not fill out the questionnaire but instead wrote an insightful analysis of the Twelve Steps as a form of religion.

“What is the difference between the original 12 Step program and any other organized religion? There is the ‘bible’—the Big Book. As in any religion, there are certain members who are fundamentalists and believe not word can be changed and that it must be followed literally. It was not ‘coincidence’ that Wilson met Dr. Bob but synchronistic from above. There are twelve steps along the path of recovery. Of course they are not required—except that it is made clear you will never enter ‘heaven’—sobriety with its richness—unless you commit to taking the steps. In fact you are told in numerous subtle and not so subtle ways that you will end up in ‘hell’ (a horrible relapse from which no return can be promised) if you don’t faithfully practice these steps. While as [in] most liberal religions, AA and other 12 step programs claim to not consider [themselves] the only road to ‘salvation’ (sobriety), it feels threatened by other forms of non-12 step programs and uses the circular reason which is based on its own premises to frighten adherents [in]to remaining true. As in all religions, adherents love to talk about the fall to hell of those who tried other paths and who stopped practicing the ‘faith.’”

This writer makes an excellent point about some of the more cultish aspects of the Twelve Step movement and the insight equating sobriety with salvation and relapsing or slipping with a fall into hell is quite apt. I am not swayed in my belief, however, that the life-and-death nature of the struggle for recovery makes the possibility of a fall into a “hell” of active addiction and very possible death more than a scare tactic—it is a reality for far too many alcoholics and addicts. Leaving an organized religion will not cause death. Neither will leaving a recovery program. But if leaving the recovery program leads the addict to pick up a drug or drink, the consequences of that action can indeed be deadly. Therefore, I reject the writer’s argument.

Another respondent responded simply with the following quotation from Michael Bridge: “When our eyes see our hands doing the work of our hearts, the circle of creation is completed. Inside us, the doors of our souls fly open and love steps forth to heal everything in sight.”

A question about the historic welcome to agnostics in the Twelve Step recovery movement and its place in a Christian recovery ministry was raised by one respondent:

“I’m in my 16<sup>th</sup> year of recovery and have worked the Steps on and off during this period. Fortunately, the Steps recommend a higher power “as you define it.” So, even agnostics like me have a place in AA. Last night at a meeting, a priest qualified and said it was only AA that helped him get sober, not the Catholic Church. In the end, AA is a program for people who want it, not for people who need it. All I care about is that it works for me.”

A concluding comment by one respondent provides a good closing for this chapter and points the way to our Conclusion. The writer, having applauded and affirmed Step By Step earlier, goes on to make the following suggestions of ways to significantly expand the reach and impact of the ministry:

“I’d like to see the addition of an ‘extra-curricular’ series of workshops/brief overview of the development of historically generated models of religion and historical constructions of God. How notions of God, godliness, and religion originated cross-culturally over time and influenced various societies through their overlaps and departures. What Western, Eastern, and Middle Eastern religions share (and what they don’t). How God came to be represented as a masculine entity that has purpose and planning for global population at individual levels. How spirituality can be widened to include atheists and agnostics (although these are reductive terms) so that the locus of spiritual practice is more humanistic and interpersonal, rather than originating in the divide or connection between individual (self) and other (God) and then extending outward into one’s life and society. Religion is, after all, a community-based “people program.” Inclusion of atheist and agnostics might seem to be a contradictory step—or threaten to skip an important one—but the result is the same and no less spiritually based; inclusiveness may actually help those struggling to accept Christianity (for those who are choosing to do so) if only to (over time) redirect them toward a faith-based higher power. Lastly, the varieties of ways that religion, worship, meditation, prayer, and spirituality can be expressed. Workshops ultimately could remain aligned with the Christian-based mission statement (by discussing religious variants, you can arrive more clearly at your purpose).”

With this challenge to take Step By Step to a new and different level, we conclude our chapter about our current congregation and prepare to present a vision for an expanded Twelve Step Christian recovery ministry in the Conclusion.

## **CONCLUSION: TOWARD A TRANSFORMATIVE NEW MINISTRY**

### **Introduction**

In the course of this paper, we have explored the historical, theological, biblical, and scientific foundations of the Step By Step Recovery Ministry. We have examined Step By Step's worship practices and theology and "we have done a new thing" in worship and then reflected the effects of changes we made in our liturgy, music, and settings. We have studied Step By Step's congregation—past, present, and potential members and heard what they appreciate about this distinctive ministry and what they would like to see as Step By Step expands into new forms and settings of Twelve Step Christian recovery ministry in the future. This project showed us the ways in which the work done in Step By Step is durable and adaptable to new manifestations.

The remainder of this Conclusion will take the form of a concrete proposal that takes into account all we have learned in this demonstration project. Based on the experience of the past year and the research of this project, I believe that Step By Step is now ready to grow and adapt into a new and expanded form, into an entirely new entity that will incorporate Step By Step's ministry and activities while also being able to do so much more.



**The Resource Center for Recovery Ministries  
A Proposal to  
The President and Vice President for Academic Affairs and Academic Dean  
of  
New York Theological Seminary  
  
from  
  
The Rev. Paul William Bradley  
Step By Step Recovery Ministry**

This is a proposal to establish “The Resource Center for Recovery Ministries,” a program to be housed within the Center for Transformative Practices in Ministry of New York Theological Seminary. The impetus for the establishment of this new Resource Center comes from seven years of experience by this author and my co-ministers in the Step By Step Recovery Ministry, founded in 2000, which I have led since 2001. As documented in the Doctor of Ministry Demonstration Project, “Recovering In Christ: Building a Durable And Adaptable Twelve-Step Christian Recovery Ministry for Small Groups, Churches, and Other Settings,” there is an ongoing interest in linking Twelve-Step recovery and a Christian worship experience by some individuals in recovery from addictions and compulsions as well as by individuals with connections to organized religion, including churches and seminaries.

***Rationale***

Why do members of the clergy and churches need resources and training in issues around substance abuse and recovery? A 2001 study by The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (CASA) stated that

“a better understanding by the clergy of the disease of alcohol and drug abuse and addiction among members of their congregations and a better appreciation by the

medical profession, especially psychiatrists and psychologists, of the power of God, religion, and spirituality to help patients with this disease hold enormous potential for prevention and treatment of substance and abuse that can help millions of Americans and their families.”<sup>335</sup>

The CASA study, which “identified an important connection between spiritual and religious practice and lower risk of substance abuse.... God, religion, and spirituality are key factors for many in prevention and treatment of substance abuse and continuing recovery.”<sup>336</sup> If religion can play such a critical role both in the prevention and treatment of substance abuse and addiction, one would think that organized religion would be deeply committed to this partnership. The study found that 94 percent of clergy members—priest, ministers, and rabbis—recognize substance abuse as an important issue among family members in their congregations and almost 38 percent believe that alcohol abuse is involved” in family problems with which they deal.<sup>337</sup>

Yet, astonishingly, “only 12.5 percent of all clergy completed any coursework related to substance abuse while studying to be a member of the clergy and only 28.5 percent of... seminaries [require] students preparing for the ministry... to take courses on the subject.”<sup>338</sup> Even more troubling, once they are out of school and serving their congregations, “only 36.5 percent of clergy report that they preach a sermon on substance abuse more than once a year; 22.4 percent say they never preach on the subject.”

Dale Ryan has written,

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<sup>335</sup> Joseph A. Califano, Jr., Chairman and President, CASA, “Accompanying Statement,” *So Help Me God: Substance Abuse, Religion and Spirituality, A CASA White Paper* (New York, National Center of Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, 2001), i.

<sup>336</sup> CASA, *So Help Me God*, p1-2.

<sup>337</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

<sup>338</sup> *Idem*.

“When I left seminary I had only a very limited understanding of addiction and abuse. It was certainly not a high priority in the seminary curriculum. If they came up at all, addiction and abuse were usually assumed to be unusual. Recovery ministry was thought to be a kind of specialization within the general category of pastoral care. It did not take me long in the real world of ministry, however, to realize that this neglect of addiction and abuse was a huge mistake. Addiction was everywhere. Abuse was commonplace. Why, I wondered, had I not been better prepared for realities this important and this common? I soon felt like I was engaged in a kind of asymmetric spiritual warfare. There was clearly a war being waged, but I was almost completely ignorant about the weapons that the enemies of God's kingdom were finding to be most useful. Weapons of mass insanity did exist—and I was clueless about them....

I was reasonably well trained to be helpful in situations involving crisis and grief; that had been part of the training. But there is a huge difference between the instincts and skills necessary for helping people who are struggling with crisis and grief and the instincts and skills necessary for helping people who are struggling with addiction and abuse. For one thing, crises and grief are unavoidable kinds of suffering. We all experience crises and grief in our lives. They're part of the package. Addiction and abuse, however, are avoidable kinds of suffering. They are not necessary. Someone must make some very bad choices, usually over a long period of time, for addiction and abuse to emerge. This introduces a completely different dynamic, one that was very confusing to me at first. When I left seminary I had very few ‘handles,’ intellectually, theologically or spiritually, to help me understand the complexities of addiction and abuse. And I believe this is true of most pastors today. Some people say that pastors and lay leaders should be trained primarily to deal with the unavoidable of life, since those are probably the issues that most people struggle with, and that we should leave things like addiction and abuse for specialists. That's what I thought when I was in seminary. And it would make sense if crisis and grief were common but addiction and abuse were rare. Tragically, the evidence suggests otherwise.... Addiction is not just a problem for the street drunks downtown. I am convinced that addiction is the most common struggle faced by people in most churches--and for that matter, in most communities....We live in a world full of addiction and abuse, and if you want to do ministry in this context, it just makes sense to acquire some basic understanding and skills to help you in the battle.”<sup>339</sup>

Clearly, there is a tremendous need to draw clearer connections between the problems and solutions of addiction and recovery and the tremendous gifts that faith communities and their leaders have to offer people struggling for answers, for guidance, for hope, for wholeness, for recovery.

This is where the Resource Center for Recovery Ministries can fill a vacuum in national leadership—in a setting known for prophetic leadership on cutting-edge and

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<sup>339</sup> Dale Ryan, “Theological Education & Recovery,” The National Association for Christian Recovery,” <http://www.nacronline.com/dox/library/daler/theologicaleducation.shtml>. Accessed 12/05/07.

controversial issues, New York Theological Seminary—and in so doing respond to a pressing need and potentially save many lives.

The new Center would provide resources and leadership in the following ways, among others:

- Provide resources and leadership for new Step By Step Christian Recovery Ministries in New York City and throughout the nation
- Provide Christian recovery resources and leadership for “Recovery Sunday” and “Recovery Day/Weekend” programs in churches, seminaries, and denominational bodies nationwide;
- Offer seminary courses on ministering with and to people with addictions and compulsions, people in recovery, and families and friends affected by the disease of addiction and compulsion;
- Host Twelve Step Christian recovery retreats and workshops;
- Offer resources and leadership to Twelve Step fellowships, conferences, and other gatherings on the topic of Spirituality and Recovery;
- Host an online discussion group, possibly supported by a weblog, dedicated to radically inclusive Twelve Step Christian recovery, making clear the positive connections between Christian and recovery practices and supporting those in need of support and affirmation or with questions in their journeys of Christian discipleship and recovery;
- Offer a similar group for non-Christians; and
- Publish its findings and provide materials for putting these findings into action in a workbook/manual (a template for which appears in my *Recovering in Christ*

D.Min. project appendix) and a print and electronic newsletter dedicated to Twelve Step Christian recovery ministry.

### ***Related Programs***

At Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, there has, since 2004, been the Fuller Institute for Recovery Ministry. Its mission statement is as follows:

The Institute for Recovery Ministry at Fuller Theological Seminary was established in January of 2004 for the purpose of encouraging the development of recovery ministries. In addition to offering a number of academic degree programs related to recovery ministry, the Institute hopes to develop training programs, intensive think-tank experiences for ministry leaders and a variety of other programs.<sup>340</sup>

The Institute offers three academic programs: the Master of Divinity with a Concentration in Recovery Ministry; the Master of Arts in Recovery Ministry, and the Certificate Program in Recovery Ministry. The Institute also intends to begin offering other programs although it is not clear if this has yet begun. While the primary focus of the Fuller Institute at this time is on training ministers to better deal with issues of recovery—a critical and laudable mission and something that our Resource Center would offer as well in our seminary curriculum and in special workshops, retreats, and intensives at New York Theological Seminary—there is a significant difference between our missions and the populations we hope to reach. While Fuller is by its own definition an Evangelical and conservative theological institution which states that “the gap between our view and theological liberalism”<sup>341</sup> is wide, both New York Theological

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<sup>340</sup> “About the Fuller Institute for Recovery Ministry,” <http://www.fullerinstitute.org/dox/about.html>. Accessed 1/20/07.

<sup>341</sup> Fuller Theological Seminary website, “What We Believe and Teach,” [http://www.fuller.edu/provost/aboutfuller/believe\\_teach.asp](http://www.fuller.edu/provost/aboutfuller/believe_teach.asp). Accessed 1/20/07.

Seminary and Step By Step practice a theology of radical inclusion, embracing diversity and celebrating the journey of living in community with all our differences.

The broad range of ages, races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and most importantly, personal theologies found in both NYTS and Step By Step prepare us well to train ministers to reach a much broader population than, I contend, Fuller and its recovery ministry is able to.

### ***Potential Funding***

In my capacity as a professional development officer with 25 years of experience in the field of fundraising for not-for-profit and educational institutions, and nearly ten years of experience as a seminary development officer, it is my strong belief that it would be possible to obtain funding for the Resource Center for Recovery Ministries. Given strong evidence of interest among some foundations and research agencies, such as the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, in identifying novel ways to address the ongoing problem of substance abuse and treatment. CASA staff have indicated that research in this area is fundable. A viable program could be developed that would provide funding for staff and administrative assistance; modest honoraria to encourage churches and other institutions to host Twelve Step Christian recovery ministries in their settings; travel and scholarship funds for workshops and retreats; honoraria for leaders of these gatherings; technical assistance funds to enable leaders to visit sites nationwide to provide assistance in establishing new sites and/or to provide leadership at Recovery Sunday services; and funds for publication and dissemination of materials both in print, on the internet, and through hosted discussion groups and/or weblogs.

## **Conclusion**

The potential for transformation for so many individuals, ministers, and congregations that is possible through the expansion of Step By Step into a Resource Center for Recovery Ministries is tremendous. I hope New York Theological Seminary will embrace this proposal and the hope and promise of the riches of recovery it will enable us to share with so many.

**APPENDIX A**  
**RECOVERING IN CHRIST: A USERS MANUAL**  
**Starting A Twelve Step Recovery Ministry at Your Church—A Step By Step Guide**



## **APPENDIX A**

### **RECOVERING IN CHRIST: A USERS MANUAL Starting A Twelve Step Recovery Ministry at Your Church—A Step By Step Guide**

#### **Introduction**

This manual builds on the experience of seven years of worship and practice of the Step By Step Recovery Ministry, a Christian worship program that incorporates the Twelve Steps of the recovery movement with Christian Scripture, doctrine, practice, and worship. We have developed a wide array of resources to help you create your own Twelve Step Christian Recovery ministries in your church, from small group ministries to recovery-themed worship services to retreats and workshops geared at both your congregation and your wider community, including the community of people struggling with addictions or celebrating their ongoing recovery. Each could benefit from the blessings of Christ, just as congregations can be blessed with the powerful witness of people whose lives have been turned around and saved by God to live into new meaning through the miracle of recovery.

Recovering in Christ offers ways to think about introducing Twelve Step Christian recovery into your setting, and materials you will need. This includes:

- Sample orders of service for worship;
- Elements of liturgy;
- Suggested hymns;
- Resources for interactive rituals for your congregation to put their recovery experience into practice; and
- Sample sermons.

It is our hope that congregations and other groups will use and freely adapt these materials to meet and address the needs of their own settings.

## **Getting Started**

***Identify a Need:*** Does your church host Twelve Step recovery programs like Alcoholics Anonymous, Debtors Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, Nicotine Anonymous, Al-Anon Family Groups, Codependents Anonymous? Try attending an “Open Meeting” of one or more of these groups to learn how they work and freely identify yourself as the pastor (or whatever role you play) of the church, who is there to learn and to express support and solidarity. Do you know of any members of these groups who also attend your church? Have any members of your congregation expressed interest in Twelve Step recovery or issues connected with addiction, compulsion, or unhealthy behaviors, attitudes, or relationships? (According to a study by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, “God, religion, and spirituality are key factors for many in prevention and treatment of substance abuse and continuing recovery.”<sup>342</sup>

***Introduce Recovery themes*** into a special worship service, either a regular Sunday worship, a weeknight worship, or a program after church or on a weekend or weeknight.

***Invite people*** you know in recovery either within or outside your congregation to speak/testify about their own journeys of addiction and recovery as part of a special segment in worship about themes in the liturgical calendar, such as “Hope” and

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<sup>342</sup> CASA, *So Help Me God: Substance Abuse, Religion, and Spirituality: A White Paper* (New York, CASA, 2001), 2.

“Promise” for Advent, “New Freedom” or “New Possibilities” for Christmas, “Transformation” for Transfiguration Sunday, “Trial,” “Challenge,” or even “Surrender” for Lent, “Resurrection/Rebirth” for Easter, etc.

### **A Program for a Twelve Step Recovery Ministry**

Find a night free of conflicting activities at your church. Start modestly, meeting once a month. Increase the meetings to twice a month or weekly if interest builds. Following are some suggested steps you will need to take in order to get started.

**Identify your sacred texts.** The Bible is obviously your principal sacred text, but Twelve Step recovery has its own central literature that you will need to hold in dialogue and tension with Holy Scripture as you seek to bridge Christianity and Recovery. A good place to start is with the Twelve Steps. In Step By Step, we have adapted the original Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous to make them more broadly encompassing of different addictions, compulsions, and destructive behaviors, attitudes, and relationships.

Here are the Twelve Steps of Spiritual Recovery of the Step By Step Recovery Ministry as adapted from A.A.’s Twelve Steps.

#### The Twelve Steps of Spiritual Recovery of the Step By Step Recovery Ministry.<sup>343</sup>

25. We admitted we were powerless over addictive, compulsive, and destructive behaviors, attitudes and relationships—that our lives had become unmanageable.
26. We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
27. We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood God.
28. We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
29. We admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
30. We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
31. We humbly asked God to remove our shortcomings.

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<sup>343</sup>Adapted from *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1952, 1953, 1981), 5-9.

32. We made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
33. We made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
34. We continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
35. We sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood God, praying only for knowledge of God's will for us and the power to carry that out.
36. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to others who suffer from addictions, compulsions, and destructive behaviors, attitudes, and relationships and to practice these principles in all our activities.

**Study the Steps and learn what they are about.** Here are brief summaries of the central themes of the Steps and brief synopses of each Step.

#### **The Central Message of Each of the Twelve Steps<sup>344</sup>**

- |          |                     |
|----------|---------------------|
| Step 1.  | Honesty             |
| Step 2.  | Hope                |
| Step 3.  | Faith               |
| Step 4.  | Courage             |
| Step 5.  | Integrity           |
| Step 6.  | Willingness         |
| Step 7.  | Humility            |
| Step 8.  | Fellowship and Love |
| Step 9.  | Justice             |
| Step 10. | Perseverance        |
| Step 11. | Spirituality        |
| Step 12. | Service             |

#### **Short Synopses of the Twelve Steps<sup>345</sup>**

STEP ONE: *"We admitted we were powerless over addictive, compulsive, and destructive behaviors and attitudes—that our lives had become unmanageable."* Who cares to admit complete defeat? Admission of powerlessness is the first step in liberation. Relation of humility to sobriety. In the case of addictions, we have a mental plus physical allergy. Why must every addictive and compulsive person hit bottom?

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<sup>344</sup> From popular handout available at A.A. meetings, author unknown.

<sup>345</sup> *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1952, 1953, 1981), 5-13.

STEP TWO: *"We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity."*

What can we believe in? Recovery does not demand belief; the Twelve Steps are only suggestions. Importance of an open mind. Variety of ways to faith. Substitution of recovery groups for a higher power. Plight of the disillusioned. Roadblocks of indifference and prejudice. Lost faith found in recovery. Problems of intellectuality and self-sufficiency. Negative and positive thinking. Self-righteousness. Defiance is an outstanding characteristic of addictive and compulsive people. Step Two is a rallying point to sanity. Right relation to God.

STEP THREE: *"We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood [God]."*

Step Three is like the opening of a locked door. How shall we let God into our lives? Willingness is the key. Dependence is a means to independence. Dangers of self-sufficiency. Turning our will over to our higher power. Misuse of willpower. Sustained and personal exertion necessary to conform to God's will.

STEP FOUR: *"We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves."*

How instincts can exceed their proper function. Step Four is an effort to discover our liabilities. Basic problem of extremes in instinctive drives. Misguided moral inventory can result in guilt, grandiosity, or blaming others. Assets can be noted with liabilities. Self-justification is dangerous. Willingness to take inventory brings light and new confidence. Step Four is the beginning of a lifetime practice. Common symptoms of emotional insecurity are worry, anger, self-pity, and depression. Inventory reviews personal relationships. Importance of thoroughness.

STEP FIVE: *"We admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs."*

The Twelve Steps deflate the ego. Step Five is difficult but necessary to sobriety, recovery, and peace of mind. Confession is an ancient discipline. Without fearless admission of defects, few could stay sober or in recovery. What do we receive from Step Five? Beginning of true kinship with humanity and God. Lose sense of isolation, receive forgiveness and give it; learn humility; gain honesty and realism about ourselves. Necessity for complete honesty. Danger of rationalization. How to choose the person in whom to confide. Results are tranquillity and consciousness of God. Oneness with God and our fellow human beings prepares us for following Steps.

STEP SIX: *"We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character."*

Step Six is necessary to spiritual growth. The beginning of a lifetime job. Recognition of difference between striving for objective and perfection. Why we must keep trying. "Being ready" is all-important. Necessity of taking action. Delay is dangerous. Rebellion may be fatal. The point at which we abandon limited objectives and move toward God's will for us.

STEP SEVEN: *“We humbly asked [God] to remove our shortcomings.”*

What is humility? What can it mean to us? The avenue to true freedom of the human spirit. Necessary aid to survival. Value of ego-puncturing. Failure and misery transformed by humility Strength from weakness. Pain is the admission price to new life. Self-centered fear chief activator of defects. Step Seven is change in attitude which permits us to move out of ourselves toward God.

STEP EIGHT: *“We made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.”*

This and the next two Steps are concerned with personal relations. Learning to live with others is a fascinating adventure. Obstacles: reluctance to forgive; nonadmission of wrongs to others; purposeful forgetting. Necessity of exhaustive survey of the past. Deepening insight results from thoroughness. Kinds of harm done to others. Avoiding extreme judgments. Taking the objective view. Step Eight is the beginning of the end of isolation.

STEP NINE: *“We made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.”*

A tranquil mind is the first requisite for good judgment. Good timing is important in making amends. What is courage? Prudence means taking calculated chances. Amends begin when we enter into recovery. Peace of mind cannot be bought at the expense of others. Need for discretion. Readiness to take consequences of our past and to take responsibility for well-being of others is spirit of Step Nine.

STEP TEN: *“We continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.”*

Can we stay sober and keep emotional balance under all conditions? Self-searching becomes a regular habit. Admit, accept, and patiently correct defects. Emotional hangover. When past is settled with, present challenges can be met. Varieties of inventory. Anger, resentments, jealousy, envy, self-pity, hurt pride all led to the bottle. Self-restraint first objective. Insurance against “big-shot-ism.” Let’s look at credits as well as debits. Examination of motives.

STEP ELEVEN: *“We sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood God, praying only for knowledge of God’s will for us and the power to carry that out.”*

Meditation and prayer main channels to Higher Power. Connection between self-examination and meditation and prayer. An unshakable foundation for life. How shall we meditate? Meditation has no boundaries. An individual adventure. First result is emotional balance. What about prayer? Daily petitions for understanding of God’s will and grace to carry it out. Actual results of prayer are beyond question. Rewards of meditation and prayer.

STEP TWELVE: *“Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to others who suffer from addictive, compulsive, and*

*destructive behaviors and attitudes, and to practice these principles in all our activities.”*

Joy of living is the theme of the Twelfth Step. Action its keyword. Giving that asks no reward. Love that has no price tag. What is spiritual awakening? A new state of consciousness and being is received as a free gift. Readiness to receive gift lies in practice of Twelve Steps. The magnificent reality. Rewards of helping others who suffer from addictive, compulsive, and destructive behaviors and attitudes. Kinds of Twelfth Step work. Problems of Twelfth Step work. What about the practice of these principles in all our activities

As the leader of your recovery ministry, you will want to read books like *Alcoholics Anonymous* (“The Big Book”) and *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, both published by Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, to give you a comprehensive overview of how recovery works and the central role of working the Twelve Steps. Other recovery fellowships such as Overeaters Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, and many others also have excellent literature, and as you learn about your new recovery congregation, you may wish to incorporate readings and insights from these other fellowships as well.

**Find a name for your ministry.** We have called ours Step By Step since its founding in 2000. Other names that have worked: Recovering in Christ. Steps to Recovery is another good name. Think about the Christian experience, recovery, healing, and the Twelve Steps and see what emerges. Perhaps you will just call your group “The Fellowship.” Don’t get too bogged down on this detail! The original name that Alcoholics Anonymous wanted to use was “The Way,” but it turned out there were too many other groups with the same name. The name is not as important as what happens in the meeting and the needs that you meet.

**Involve your members.** Lead the programs until you gather some momentum, but begin from the very start to include participants in the worship program. Invite one person to read the Call to Worship, another the Preamble, and another the scripture lesson. If you have a member who is comfortable sharing his or her own recovery story, invite him to briefly give testimony or witness to his struggle and redemption through God's grace in recovery. Once your ministry has been underway for a while, you will be able to identify future testifiers among those who share, and you may wish to invite spontaneous testimony. In terms of music, you will want to have a reliable musician who may or may not need to be compensated, but if you identify musical or other artistic talent among your members, use it! If someone is a great singer, invite them to do a solo at a service. If someone has gifts in visual arts, have them lead the ritual segment of the worship with a simple, brief arts project. Do you have a dancer? Have her/him lead the congregation in healing movement, or perform a liturgical dance.

**Design your worship service.** Following is a format that has worked well for us in Step By Step. Yours can include any elements that feel right for your congregation. The key, we have found, is to incorporate elements of Twelve Step recovery into a small-group Christian worship experience. You can use the Call to Worship we offer here, or another, you can use the version of the Twelve Steps we have developed, or another, and you can use any other liturgical elements that work for your group.

### **Step By Step Worship: Order of Service**

**Opening Music**

Minister of Music

**Call to Worship**

Lay Reader and Congregation



*By Paul Bradley, based on the Serenity Prayer (long version) by Reinhold Niebuhr  
(Congregational response in Bold)*

God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things which should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.

**God's will, not ours, be done.**

Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time, accepting hardship as a pathway to peace.

**God's will, not ours, be done.**

Taking this sinful world as it is, not as we would have it, trusting that You will make all things right, if we surrender to Your will.

**God's will, not ours, be done.**

So that we may be reasonably happy in this life, and supremely happy with You forever in the next.

**God's will, not ours, be done. Amen.**

<b>Step By Step Preamble</b>	Lay Reader
<b>Hymn</b>	Congregation
<b>Invocation, Reading of the Step, and Check-Ins</b>	Minister
<b>Hymn</b>	Congregation
<b>Scripture</b>	Lay Reader
<b>Sermon</b>	Minister or Guest Preacher
<b>Ritual or Testimony</b>	Minister or Guest Preacher
<b>Offering</b>	Minister
<b>Hymn</b>	Congregation
<b>Benediction</b>	Minister or Guest Preacher

It is important, we feel, to include as many elements of traditional Christian worship as possible to make the experience feel, at once, like a worship service and like a Twelve Step meeting, but also like neither—something new, different, exciting, and challenging. Expect people familiar with Twelve Step recovery to be surprised by your

format—the hymns, the scripture, the sermon. Expect people familiar with worship to be equally surprised for different reasons—the sharing, the rigorous honesty among participants who are in recovery, and are used to baring their souls in a small group—*because they know they need to* if they want to save their own lives.

**Bulletin:** Create a worship bulletin and hand it out at every service. Tell people about your recovery ministry and give them the program for the evening to either reassure them or prepare them and to give them something to take away with them for further reflection—and to share with friends who might benefit from a ministry of recovery.

**Flyers:** Create colorful flyers announcing your ministry and post them on your church bulletin boards and other places in your community. Leave stacks of flyers in public areas of the church, especially on Sunday mornings and at times when Twelve Step groups meet in your space. You are doing evangelism for a Christian ministry, it's all right! Include a notice or box in your regular Sunday bulletin and church calendar. Create an electronic version of your flyer/announcement to send to everyone on the church's mailing list and to other electronic lists that might find your services of interest. Encourage people to forward your material to friends and colleagues.

### **Other Ways to Introduce a Recovery Ministry**

Not every congregation will be receptive or conducive to an ongoing monthly Twelve Step recovery ministry. If this is the case, or in addition to starting your small-group ministry, consider holding a “Recovery Sunday” at your church. Incorporate the themes of recovery into worship as a way of opening the doors and windows of the gift of

recovery to people in your congregation who may or may not have a problem with addiction, compulsion, and unhealthy behaviors, attitudes, and relationships—or may have someone in their lives who has these issues. Most people will never set foot in a Twelve Step meeting. This is a unique opportunity to provide a glimpse of the transformative process that takes place in recovery. If only one member of your congregation decides to try a Twelve Step meeting because of this special Sunday focus, you will have transformed a life and all those many others who are touched by this one life. If members of the congregation report benefiting from this special service, you can try starting your own Twelve Step recovery ministry, as described above.

Recognizing that each church's worship format differs significantly, following are a number of elements that tend to be able to be incorporated into many different liturgies:

- Call to Worship based on the Serenity Prayer.
- Brief Testimony(ies) from Congregants about their own recovery experiences and journeys.
- Hymns (suggested):
  - God, Grant Us the Serenity
  - Amazing Grace
  - Send Out the Lifeline
- Sermon on a Recovery theme. Every pastor, every preacher, has a story of recovery and redemption in her/his own life, whether from personal experience or the experience of a loved one, family member, friend, or parishioner who has experienced transformation and rebirth through a struggle with addiction, compulsion, and so on. For more about preaching on recovery, see below.

## **Working Through the Steps in a Monthly or Ongoing Worship Service**

Using the resources outlined above, here is a suggested format for leading a small-group ministry through the Twelve Steps. If you offer your ministry once a month, you will work through the Twelve Steps once a year.

**Opening Music:** If you meet in your church sanctuary, chapel, or other room with a piano, find a pianist for your ministry and have music at the beginning to set the mood of contemplation and worship. If there is no piano, consider finding someone who plays guitar, recorder, or other portable instrument suitable to accompanying the singing of hymns.

### **Call to Worship<sup>346</sup>**

*(Congregational response in Bold)*

God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things which should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.

**God's will, not ours, be done.**

Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time, accepting hardship as a pathway to peace.

**God's will, not ours, be done.**

Taking this sinful world as it is, not as we would have it, trusting that You will make all things right, if we surrender to Your will.

**God's will, not ours, be done.**

So that we may be reasonably happy in this life, and supremely happy with You forever in the next.

**God's will, not ours, be done. Amen.**

**Welcome to the service:** Set the groundrules for the meeting. What it is and is not. Include a statement of confidentiality such as this: Our Twelve Step Christian

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<sup>346</sup> By Paul Bradley, based on the Serenity Prayer (long version) by Reinhold Niebuhr

recovery worship services are intentionally declared to be safe spaces, with a guarantee of anonymity for participants, although obviously not for leaders, whose names appear on printed material and in publicity and as e-mail and telephone contacts. A standard Twelve-Step Program statement, “Who you see here, what you hear here, let it stay here so this remains a safe place for all of us to share,” is made at every meeting. Another clarifying statement also is offered: “It’s all right for me to say that I was here, and it’s all right for you to say you were here, but it’s not all right for me to say that *you* were here, or for you to say that *I* was here.”

**Preamble:** If you decide to develop a preamble for your group, read it here. This is the one developed by Step By Step, adapted from the Alcoholics Anonymous

Preamble:

#### Step By Step Preamble

Step By Step is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from addictions, compulsions and destructive behaviors, attitudes, and relationships and to support those whose relatives and friends struggle with these issues. The only requirement for membership is a desire for recovery using the Twelve Steps as spiritual tools. Step By Step has no dues or fees; we are self-supporting through our own contributions. Step By Step is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organization or institution; does not wish to engage in any controversy, neither endorses nor opposes any causes. Our primary purpose is to stay clean, sober, and abstinent from destructive behaviors, attitudes, and relationships and to support others in their journeys of recovery.

**Read the Step.** For your first service, you are on Step One: We admitted we were powerless over addictive, compulsive, and destructive behaviors, attitudes and relationships—that our lives had become unmanageable. If you wish, read the synopsis of the Step as well, found above.

**Invocation and Check-ins.** Deliver an extemporaneous Invocation as the Spirit moves you, or write one. Here is a written Invocation we have used:

**Invocation**<sup>347</sup>

Creator God, we call on you tonight, right here and right now in a special way.  
Because we know that through your power that we were created.  
We know that every breath we take,  
every morning we wake,  
and every moment of every hour,  
We live under your power and through your grace.  
Healing God, we ask you now to touch us with that same power.  
For if you created us from nothing,  
you can certainly recreate us here tonight.  
Fill us with the healing power of your spirit.  
Cast out anything and everything that should not be in us.  
Mend what is broken in our bodies, our hearts, and our souls.  
Root out anything that is unproductive and unhealthy.  
Let the warmth of your healing love fill us,  
Fill our empty places, our hurting places, our lonely places  
With your limitless unconditional healing love.  
Transforming God, restore us to fullness of body, mind, and spirit  
so that we may fully serve you the rest of our lives.  
We ask all this in the name of Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

**After the Invocation, talk briefly about the theme of the Step.** This will provide a focus for the check-in, such as, for Step One, “What do you feel powerless over today?” During the check-in, invite members of the small group to identify themselves as much or as little as they like, including the substance or behavior they are in recovery from if they choose, and then respond by sharing about the topic for the check-in.

**Hymns.** Every hymnal or book of folksongs or camp songs has music with the theme of hope and redemption. Think of “Amazing Grace.” Some songs have great uplifting power even though their words seem somewhat grim! Choose hymns and songs

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<sup>347</sup> Adapted from B. Madaras, Personal Prayer,  
[http://www.worldprayers.org/frameit.cgi?/archive/index/invocations\\_index.html](http://www.worldprayers.org/frameit.cgi?/archive/index/invocations_index.html). Accessed 7/25/05.

carefully to try to advance your message. Tie hymns and songs into the liturgical calendar when possible. Some members of your Twelve Step recovery ministry will have no other Christian worship experience than this one—let them experience and sing the Christmas or Easter hymns of their youth in a new, healing, supportive environment. Consult the sample format for each Step service for suggested hymns.

**Scripture.** Each recovery service should be jointly rooted in Holy Scripture and the Twelve Steps. Just as Karl Barth recommended holding the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other, we hold the Bible and the literature of recovery in creative tension. It has been suggested that all religion is about recovery, and the Judeo-Christian tradition certainly focuses on themes of recovery. Therefore, it is not difficult to find texts that illustrate recovery themes, using only a little imagination. It is quite possible to follow the Revised Common Lectionary texts for a week and find correlation with the Step or recovery theme of the month. Some particularly rich resources are found in the New Testament in the Sermon on the Mount (especially the Beatitudes) in Matthew, Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians, the Book of James, among many others. In the Hebrew Bible, Isaiah, the Psalms, Lamentations, the Book of Job, and Proverbs are rich in recovery themes.

Take a moment to consider The Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12) to see what themes of recovery are revealed for you.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
Blessed are they who mourn,  
for they shall be comforted.  
Blessed are the meek,  
for they shall inherit the earth.  
Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness,  
for they shall be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful,  
for they shall obtain mercy.  
Blessed are the pure of heart,  
for they shall see God.  
Blessed are the peacemakers,  
for they shall be called children of God.  
Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
Blessed are you, when men shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my  
sake.  
Rejoice, and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven;  
for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.”

Some translators suggest that a better word than “Blessed” is “Happy.” Read the Beatitudes replacing Blessed with Happy and discuss how this changes your feelings about the text.

**Prayer:** As the author of James writes (5:16), “The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.” Recovery worship may contain both written prayer through its use of the Serenity Prayer in the Call to Worship, and extemporaneous prayer in the Invocation. Additional prayers are often added as a response to personal sharing during the Check-ins or the Ritual, and the Ritual often includes prayer as well. Finally, the Benediction is usually prayed extemporaneously as well, and members of the congregation are often invited to share in a group benediction of many voices lifted up to God in prayer. On some occasions, the short version of the Serenity Prayer (discussed below) is offered at the very end of the Benediction. Our theology of prayer, evidenced in six years of practice, is described well by Lang, as “a supplication spoken by someone filled with God’s Spirit [that] cannot fail to produce results.”<sup>348</sup> There are many prayers pertinent to recovery found in daily meditation books and many other devotional guides.

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<sup>348</sup> Bernhard Lang, *Sacred Games*, 402.



The Beliefnet.com website will send a prayer to your e-mailbox daily if you sign up, and these often have recovery themes, such as the one below:

**Prayer to Help Me to Stay Sober**

Dear God,

Thank you for this day. Help me to stay clean and sober, just for this day. Help me to recognize your hand in all things. Thank you for the blessings I understand and the ones I don't. Thank you for the miracles I see and the ones I don't. Thank you for your spirit who always abides in me. I ask that I may be with your spirit today. Cleanse my mind of all darkness and fill it with love and light. Let me be o.k. with this day no matter what it brings. Thank you for everything that's in my life and everything that's not.<sup>349</sup>

**Sermon:** Leaders are encouraged to develop their own sermons on recovery themes, and as you gain experience, you will find that it is easy to do and deeply rewarding. In this manual, we provide a number of sample sermons to use as “sermon seeds,” to adapt, or to deliver while you become more comfortable preaching your own personal message of recovery.

**Testimony:** Lang says that “despite their great variety of style and content, testimonies can generally be defined as autobiographical stories that include a religious interpretation. Without that interpretation, the story would not be a testimony and therefore, in the eyes of the congregation, not worth telling.”<sup>350</sup> In services where there is no formal section for testimony, the time for Check-ins by the congregation and interactive sharing during the Ritual provide opportunities for people to share what they need to share and request help and support from God and from the group.

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<sup>349</sup> From Beliefnet.com front page prayer, December 2006.

<sup>350</sup> Bernhard Lang, *Sacred Games*, 49.

**Ritual:** The Ritual is used as a way of encouraging interaction and deeper reflection among worship participants. Varying from service to service, the Ritual has included such practices as healing prayer, movement, writing/journaling, candle-lighting, one-on-one dialogue, and group sharing. The Ritual tends to lift up a concern or element of the Step or Steps that are the focus of the evening's service.

**Worksheets on the Twelve Steps and Other Recovery Tools:** These are distributed as resources for the interactive "Ritual" section of worship services, and as materials to take home and work on independently. Samples of several worksheets follow.

**Benediction:** either prayed extemporaneously or from a text, often a wonderful opportunity to invite members of the congregation to add their own prayers of thanksgiving and petition.

### **Working the Steps in a Recovery Ministry Step by Step and Month by Month**

Use the themes for each Step listed above and the synopses to get ideas of how to approach the month's lesson. Tie the Step in to a pertinent scripture reading either from the Revised Common Lectionary or suggested by one of the following useful recovery-oriented Bibles and devotional guides, such as *Serenity: A Companion for Christian Recovery*, a version of the New Testament, Psalms, and Proverbs using the New King James Version of the Bible with highlighted scripture passages relevant to particular Steps.

Another resource is *The Twelve Steps for Christians*, which provides selected scriptures and related meditations for each of the Twelve Steps using the New

International Version of the Bible, and also provides cross-references to a third resource, *The Life Recovery Bible*, the most comprehensive of these three. It uses the New Living Translation and provides a full text of both Testaments with highlighted text and marginal notes throughout connecting particular passages to different Steps. *The Life Recovery Bible* also intersperses more detailed pages of reflections on the Steps in connection with Bible passages. The advantages and limitations of each of the translations used for these resources is ripe fodder for a different discussion.

In addition, the A.A. historian Dick B. has connected many passages in the A.A. Big Book with scriptural references in the Bible (King James Version) in *The Good Book and The Big Book: A.A.'s Roots in the Bible*.<sup>351</sup>

**Think creatively about the Steps and about the message of recovery.** We often find it beneficial not to focus on the numbers of the Steps but rather to concentrate on the message and theme embodied in each of the Steps. Consider delivering a message on clusters of Steps and the themes contained in them:

- The Wake Up Steps: One, Two and Three
- The Clean Up Steps: Four, Five, Six, Seven, Eight, and Nine
- The Grow Up Steps: Ten, Eleven and Twelve
- Also consider focusing on tools of the Twelve Step recovery process.
- The Promises (especially when you reach Step Nine)
- The Slogans: One Day at a Time, Easy Does It, Think Think Think, Stinkin' Thinkin', KISS Keep It Simple Sweetheart, etc.

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<sup>351</sup> Dick B., *The Good Book and The Big Book: A.A.'s Roots in the Bible* (Kihei, Hawaii: Paradise Research Publications, 1997), p180-188.

- Do a service and sermon just on the Serenity Prayer.

***The Serenity Prayer:*** A central element in Twelve Step recovery, and in Step By Step, is the Serenity Prayer (discussed in depth in Chapter Two), which serves as Call To Worship, Benediction, and mantra, a tool for spiritual discipline, uplift, hope, and consolation. Consider using the popular shorter version of the Serenity Prayer or the less-familiar long version. Both follow below:

The Serenity Prayer (Original version by Reinhold Niebuhr, ca. 1926-32)

God, give us grace to accept with serenity  
The things that cannot be changed,  
Courage to change the things  
Which should be changed,  
And the wisdom to distinguish  
The one from the other.

Living one day at a time,  
Enjoying one moment at a time,  
Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,  
Taking, as Jesus did,  
This sinful world as it is,  
Not as I would have it,  
Trusting that You will make all things right,  
If I surrender to Your will,  
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life,  
And supremely happy with You forever in the next.  
Amen.<sup>352</sup>

The Serenity Prayer (Current abridged version)

God, grant me the serenity  
to accept the things  
I cannot change,  
Courage to change the  
things I can, and the  
wisdom to know the difference.<sup>353</sup>

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<sup>352</sup> *A.A. Grapevine* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1950).

## Worksheets and Other Tools

The following pages present some useful tools we have developed to help people in our congregations work through the themes and issues raised by working the Steps and traveling the road of addiction, compulsion, and recovery. These are optional but may prove helpful. We encourage you to develop your own materials for rituals, workshops, and retreats.

### **The Step By Step Ministry Personal Spiritual Recovery Plan**<sup>354</sup>

For use with Steps One, Two and Three and Ongoing

Our Personal Spiritual Recovery Plan is a written guideline of the addictive, compulsive, destructive behaviors and attitudes and the people, places, and things that prevent us from realizing our full potential as God's beloved children.

The purpose of the Plan is to make clear to ourselves on paper the ways that we wish to express ourselves. By having a clearly defined plan, we are freed to conduct ourselves in ways that are personally appropriate.

Any Plan is valid if it is written down, shared with another person, and followed to the best of our ability. The suggested outline below is based on the idea that we act upon our addictions and compulsions without thought.

#### **HOW THE PLAN WORKS:**

1. **First Column: (*Surrender, Acceptance, and Liberation*):**  
Identify the behaviors and attitudes – the acts, the places, and the people—from whom or which you pray to be freed.
2. **Second Column: (*Who, What, Where, When, Why? Triggers*):**  
Identify the times that these compulsions and addictions most frequently occur.
3. **Third Column: (*Vision/ God's Yearning for Us*):**  
List the people, places, and things that you are willing to commit yourself to adding to your life in recovery. (Be realistic: Add things you are willing to do, not things you think you should do.)

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<sup>353</sup> Idem.

<sup>354</sup> Adapted from Recovery Plan of Sexual Compulsives Anonymous.

## **Personal Spiritual Recovery Plan**

### **First Column**

*Surrender,  
Acceptance,  
Liberation*

### **Second Column**

*Who, What, Where,  
When, Why?  
Triggers*

### **Third Column**

*Vision/  
God's Yearning for Us*

<b>I pray to my Higher Power to be freed from these people, places, and things, from these behaviors and attitudes:</b>	<b>The times these most frequently occur:</b>	<b>I pray to add to my life in recovery these people, places, and things:</b>

*Keep in mind that your Personal Recovery Plan will evolve as you continue to gain new insights.*

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**LITANY OF TURNING IT OVER**  
**For use with Step Three**

A table is place in the middle of the circle with a cloth on it

Leader: All of us have something —whether it’s people, places, things, attitudes, behaviors, relationships, or something else—in our lives that prevents us from leading fulfilled lives as loving and beloved children of God. Please repeat after me: AS A RESULT WE NEGLECT OUR LIVES.

Leader: For some of us, there are behaviors we would like to be freed from—problems related to excessive use of, or misuse of substances—such as alcohol, drugs, tobacco, food, sex. Please repeat after me: AS A RESULT WE NEGLECT OUR BODIES AND OUR HEALTH.

Leader: Others among us misuse our energy—we spend too much time on the internet, or in front of the television, or playing video games. Please repeat after me: AS A RESULT WE NEGLECT OUR RELATIONSHIPS.

Leader: Some of us wrap ourselves up in other people’s problems, trying to fix them instead of focusing on ourselves. We say: If only our partners, parents, children, friends, bosses, coworkers, would just change, then everything would be all right! And when they don’t do what we know is right for them, sometimes we try to do it for them. Please repeat after me: AS A RESULT WE NEGLECT OUR SPIRIT.

Leader: Some of us “act out” not with booze, or cocaine, or shopping, or pornography, or potato chips, or by caretaking an addicted partner —but by wallowing in our own uncontrollable rage, fear, or self-pity. Please repeat after me: AS A RESULT WE NEGLECT OUR RESPONSIBILITY.

Leader: For these and all the issues that burden us, there is an answer. That answer is God’s lovingkindness. We don’t have to bear our burdens alone. God can help lift us from our despair, from our loneliness, from our dependencies. May we feel the love of God now! Please repeat after us: GOD, WE TURN ALL OF THESE BURDENS OVER TO YOU.

Leader: At this time, I’d like to invite members of the congregation to look at the three cards on your chairs. Each card represents one of the first three steps of spiritual recovery. The first card states: “I am powerless over these people, places, and things.” Based on the areas we have just mentioned, I invite you to write at least one person, place, or thing that you are willing to admit you are powerlessness over right now. This is our first step. The second card states: “Ways that my life is unmanageable.” Again, I invite you consider at least one way in which something in your life is beyond your own ability to manage it right now. Write this down. This is our second step. Finally, our

third card states: “I turn the following over to the care of God as I understand God.” Here, I invite you to write down something you feel powerlessness over, something that is unmanageable, in your life, in our community, or in the world. This is our third step. Let’s take a minute or two to write down our first, second, and third steps now.

We now invite you to come forward with your cards to the table and attach your cards (*use double-sided tape*) to the cloth. These cards represent the people, places, and things, the behaviors and attitudes, the obsessions and compulsions, the relationships and dependencies that hold us back and prevent us from being fulfilled as loving and beloved children of God. As you place your cards on the table, we invite you to pray: God, I turn this over to you. Please form a circle around the table after you have placed your cards.

ALL: Let us pray: God, on this table we place the symbols of our burdens—our powerlessness over aspects of our own lives and over people, places and things in our lives and in the world. We turn all of these over to your care, O God, trusting in your power to heal and infuse each of us with strength, wisdom, courage, and serenity. Amen.

FOUR LEADERS EACH HOLD ONE CORNER OF TABLECLOTH AND WITH A SINGLE MOVEMENT, TURN IT OVER. THE SIDE WITH THE SYMBOLS IS TURNED DOWN AND THE CLEAN SIDE NOW FACES UP.

**INTO BENEDICTION**



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**Step Eight: “We made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.”**

**MAKING AN EIGHTH STEP AMENDS LIST**

- Think about my relationships. List some of the addictive, compulsive, self-destructive behaviors and attitudes – some of the recurring patterns in my relationships – that have harmed others and myself.
- How do I define harm?
- Make a list of at least 10 people (as well as organizations and institutions) I resent.
  - 1.
  - 2.
  - 3.
  - 4.
  - 5.
  - 6.
  - 7.
  - 8.
  - 9.
  - 10.
- Why do I resent them?
- Think about becoming willing to pray daily for those people (and organizations and institutions) who have wronged me, understanding that doing so will help free me from my resentments and lack of forgiveness.

- Have I harmed myself? How?

- List the names of at least ten people I have harmed. Think about the ways I have harmed them.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

- What would help me become willing to make amends to each person on my list, especially those I don't want to make amends to?
- Think about which of these people I am angry at. Think about which ones and the reasons why.

#### SOME EXERCISES TO DO IN PREPARATION FOR MAKING NINTH STEP AMENDS:

- Write a letter of forgiveness to one person on my resentment list.
- Write a letter of amends to one person on my amends list.
- Write two letters to myself -- one of forgiveness and one of amends.
- Read these letters each day and follow them with a prayer for the person's healing and well-being.
- Continue this practice until my feelings toward this person begin to change, and then repeat this process for the other names on my resentment and amends lists, and for myself.

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## **A RITUAL OF FORGIVENESS AND AMENDS TO ACCOMPANY STEP EIGHT**

**Leader One:** Instructions on enacting the ritual.

**Leader One:** God, we also hold in our hearts the names of those people, organizations, and institutions that we believe have harmed us – and toward whom we hold so much resentment, so much anger, so much hatred. God, help us to recognize how much harm and violence that our resentments, anger, and hate do to us and to those around us. We pray to you to help us let go of these poisonous, venomous emotions and to flood us with your spirit of forgiveness, of love. We do not have to say that those who have wronged us are right. We do not have to forget our histories and our pain. We only ask that you remove hate from our hearts and replace it with love, so we might live more peacefully and comfortably. Gracious God, we ask that you accept these names as we lift them up and grant us the willingness to forgive each of these people, each of these organizations, each of these institutions.

**Leader One:** Please come forward now with names of those you are willing to forgive.

**Leader Two:** God, in our hearts we hold the names of those we know we have harmed - friends and family members, employers and employees, people, and institutions, and organizations that we have exploited, we have injured, we have done damage to. Help us to accept and to own our responsibility in each of these damaged relationships. Gracious God, we ask that you accept these names as we lift them up and grant us the willingness to make amends to each of these people, each of these organizations, each of these institutions.

**Leader Two:** Please come forward now with names of those you are willing to make amends to.

**Leader Two:** Loving God, to your care we commit each of these names, to ask your intervention in putting each one in right relation with us, with one another, and with all of your creation. Help us to do what is right in repairing the damage done in our pasts, as you help us to forgive those who have damaged us.

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## **Preaching Recovery: A Selection of Sermons on the Twelve Steps**

You will see in the sermons that follow how personal testimony and witness is an important element in preaching on recovery, where the preacher's own experience of recovery is woven into the message. We encourage you to use the following messages as "sermon seeds" for your own meditations. The examples given can be substituted with something from your own personal experience or examples from the lives of people in recovery whose lives have personally touched you. Remember when telling another person's story to change specifics and details unless you have that person's express permission to share his or her story publicly.

If you wish to use the testimonies given in these sermons directly, find ways to connect deeply and personally with the message. The best idea of all, of course, is to preach your own original sermons on recovery drawing from your own experience, strength, hope, and faith and that of all the people you know whose stories testify to the transformative, redemptive, and salvific power of God through the miracle of recovery. A final note: many of these sermons lead directly into rituals, so look for these cues at the end of each message and incorporate them into your repertoire of recovery exercises connected to, or separate from, your sermon.

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### **1. A Sermon to a General Congregation on the Topic of Addiction**

**"When Good Vines Bear Wild Grapes"**

By the Rev. Paul William Bradley

Isaiah 5:1-7

“Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are God’s pleasant planting; God expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!”

Who among us doesn’t know how it feels to take an action, to do something, expecting a particular result and have something completely different – and often, something unwelcome – happen instead?

Think with me of a child raised lovingly and correctly by caring parents, given all the advantages, who becomes a drug addict and ends up losing home, friends, jobs, in trouble with the law. Let me give you two images: a sweet young child in a school picture; contrasted with that child now a 21-year-old young man passed out in a subway car in the middle of the night, filthy, alone, penniless. The parents ask themselves: what happened, what went wrong, how could we have failed so totally, that we could have produced such a “wild child?”

In the scripture we read this morning, a planter prepares a fertile hillside for what he expects will be a lush vineyard. All the elements are in place: good soil with the stones removed, a watchtower built in the middle to watch for birds, vermin, and, I suppose, thieves who might come and try to steal the grapes that will grow there. The planter builds a wine vat in which the fine grapes he has grown will be crushed and their juices released to make wonderful sweet wine for the enjoyment of the planter and, we might assume, the one who writes this “love-song,” the beloved of the planter.

But when the grapes mature on the vine, they are wild grapes, not cultivated. When you think of wild grapes, the kind you see growing on vines in the woods or in fields, don't you think of that popular expression, "sour grapes"? The image that comes to my mind is that of puny, hard, sour, juiceless grapes, so different from the luscious, rich ripeness and the heavenly fragrance of deep, dark concord grapes, so sweet that they're almost popping out of their skins!

What a disappointment it must have been to go to all that trouble, to toil to prepare the ideal conditions for a perfect vineyard, only to have the vines bear sour grapes that are no good to anyone. You can't make good wine out of sour grapes! They're too acidic, too dry, too small. They're only good for feeding farm animals like goats, if *they'll* even touch them.

What are we to make of this disappointing harvest? Let's go back to the passage in Isaiah. In it, the planter tears up his vineyard, breaks down the walls around it, lays the entire hillside waste. The phrase from *The Battle Hymn of the Republic* comes to mind: God "has trampled out the vineyards where the grapes of wrath are sowed." And indeed, the passage ends with the vineyard being compared to God's kingdom, the vines to the people of Israel, and the reason the grapes have gone bad is that God expected justice from God's people and got bloodshed instead, expected righteousness but instead heard a cry.

We live in unjust, unfair times, different from those in the ancient Land of Israel but no less disturbing or violent. Today, a child can have all the material advantages that Western society has to offer and still end up in the grip of addictions over which she or he has no power. So can an adult. Addictions will take away everything a person has, they

will suck the sweetness and the very juice out of the life and the set of possibilities and potentials that God gave each of us, leaving us empty, dry, sour husks.

There are sometimes hopeful endings to stories like that of our young addicted friend, who may by the grace of God find recovery from addictions through treatment, or through a peer program that uses the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. Through recovery, a person can regain her or his mental, physical, and spiritual health, become employable again, rebuilt shattered relationships with family and friends, begin to live a life of hope and promise. But too many of our young people end up being plowed under by the destructive effects of addiction, like the wild, sour grapes in the vineyard, the ground from which they grew and in which they might have flourished is laid to waste. In the battlefield of addiction – whether it is to cocaine, crack, methamphetamine, Ecstasy, pot, alcohol, or to self-destructive behaviors that can destroy lives just as surely, like sexual addiction, debting and overspending, overeating or anorexia and bulimia, gambling – sadly, many more people are lost than find the way back to life, to God.

I challenge each of us today to support people we know who are in recovery, for theirs is a brave struggle. I further challenge us to be brave enough to see signs of addictive behavior in ourselves and reach out for help to the many resources available to support us. And I challenge us to look for signs of trouble in those close to us and with support from your clergy or professional counselors be brave enough to step in and snip the wild grape from the vine before it overruns the vineyard, to give the sweet grapes a chance to grow.

It is possible to intervene and get help for someone before it is too late. We don't need to wait for the whole vineyard to be trampled before we take a brave and decisive

action to counteract the wrathful grapes of addiction in ourselves, our friends, our families, our loved ones, our coworkers.

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## **2. A Sermon on Step One and the Step Nine Promises**

“Receiving the Blessing of Jesus:  
The Healing of the Hemorrhagic Woman”

By the Rev. Paul William Bradley

Mark 5:25-34

Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, ‘If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.’ Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, ‘Who touched my clothes?’ And his disciples said to him, ‘You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, “Who touched me?”’ He looked all round to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, ‘Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.’

This story brings mind so strongly my journey of recovery. Does it for you as well? Like the hemorrhagic woman, my life—like so many of our lives—in active addiction to alcohol and drugs was long, painful, and, seemingly, with no end in sight. Yet through all these bleak years, I never felt abandoned by Jesus and in fact often felt that I was being carried and sustained by Jesus’ love and care. At the same time, no one, not even Christ, not even God, could make me do what I wasn’t ready or willing to do for myself. What God could do was to continue to give me grace—so the worst of what might befall me was always averted. Through all the years of unsavory sexual partnerings while under the influence, for instance, I would be spared being infected with HIV or otherwise having my life endangered. For all the potentially toxic combinations



of alcohol and drugs I would ingest, I would come out relatively unscathed with “only” a compromised liver, partial blindness from alcoholic malnutrition, and other non-fatal, relatively manageable health issues that improved or stabilized once I went into recovery fourteen and a half years ago.

So to return to the question. My encounter with Jesus has been a lifelong one. What happened at the moment for me which paralleled the experience of the hemorrhagic woman was the willingness to reach out and extend my hand, my soul, to the ever-available abundance of God’s love through Christ. Just as she touched Jesus’ cloak without invitation and without recrimination, so I had but to open my heart, my mind, my soul to the possibility of healing through Christ when I finally became willing to get sober—to let God into my life in an active, transforming way rather than in only a protective and preserving way. Once I became willing—which meant admitting I was an alcoholic and drug addict and seeking help through the Twelve Step recovery movement and my first A.A. meetings—then I was ready to partner with God to begin co-creating my new life, a life in which I began to seek to understand God’s will for me and to live into that promise.

When I went into recovery, my life changed, radically and beyond my comprehension or my wildest expectations. And gradually, not dramatically, although my behaviors and the way I lived my daily life changed extraordinarily from day one of not using. The person I am today, the life I lead today, the work I do, the ministries I am called to, the ways in which I am of service and the relationships I am able to participate in and contribute to, all are results of God’s gift of grace to have the willingness to give

up alcohol and drugs one day at a time and begin the rigorous work of living a sober, responsible life.

The hemorrhagic woman had to take the first step, as we do in recovery. She had to reach out to receive Jesus' blessing. In this case, she had to play an active role in her own recovery, having had the revelation that reaching out (becoming willing) was within her power but also required of her. So it is with me or anyone in recovery. No one can recover for us, no matter how well-intentioned or big-hearted. No one can make another person willing. And perhaps not even God, not even Jesus. Willingness must come from within, but God can grant a moment of grace when the spirit of willingness can fill our hearts and minds and souls, and from there the miracle can begin. The hemorrhagic woman had such a moment of grace. So did I. Both of us—and each of God's children who receive gifts of healing—need to keep the power of that gift close to heart if we are to continue to heal and grow into God's love.

Once we are in recovery, we experience freedom, sometimes for the first time. But freedom isn't a vacation. For me, freedom means an active engagement in responsibility for my actions. It means being loosed from the bonds of my own destructive thoughts and behaviors and therefore open to the possibilities of living an intentional, considered life, open to the possibilities that God has always hoped and intended for me—for all God's children, if we can get out of our own way to let God's promise flourish in our lives. The experience of freedom in recovery is not a cakewalk. Of course, initially, we experience freedom from some of the most difficult physical and emotional symptoms of addiction and that is a tremendous relief, stepping into the sunlight after a long night. To not wake up needing to vomit, unsure of what I did or said

the night before, whether I'll have a job anymore or a relationship or a home or my health—all of those kinds of radical improvements are indescribably bounteous gifts and bring with them indeed as the A.A. Promises describe, “a new freedom and a new happiness.”

But the freedom of recovery also is a lot of work, especially for people like me (and I am very much a typical, “garden-variety drunk,” so I speak for millions like me) who before going into recovery tended not to accept “life on life’s terms” but tried to make our own rules and skip the work and responsibility that “ordinary” people understand and accept as they covenant with their fellows to participate in society for the common good (ideally, of course!). This is anathema for active alcoholics and addicts. Playing by the rules is for someone else. Living by any kind of ethical or professional standards is viewed cynically by most of us when we are active in our addictions. We are “extraordinary” people for whom rules were meant to be broken or ignored. Getting through that grandiosity and alienation in recovery is a great challenge and is the undoing of many people in recovery who can put down the drink or the drug but can’t bring themselves to let go of the alcoholic/addictive attitudes and behaviors that ultimately can be just as destructive to our well-being and our ability to create new lives for ourselves in a sober context.

So freedom, in recovery, is really about accepting responsibility, accepting society’s limitations and regulations—within bounds, of course. We do not have to accept injustice or restrictions against true freedom any more than anyone else, but we also need to be particularly mindful not to use political or social rationales as an excuse to act out, to use causes as a platform for behaving in a less than sober manner. It is

possible to live a sober life and avoid the intoxicating drama (really high drama or even melodrama, for us) of the passion of causes and concerns to avoid working on ourselves and advancing our own recovery. As I embrace all the issues and concerns that matter increasingly to me the more I live in recovery, the more important it is for me to remember that, as A.A. reminds us, my “primary purpose is to stay sober and help others to achieve sobriety,” because if I lose sight of that, all the rest of what I have done and am doing and can continue to do to advance the vision of God’s reign on earth can be jeopardized.

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### **3. A Sermon on Steps One, Two, and Three**

“Acceptance, Awareness, Action”

By the Rev. Paul William Bradley

James 4: 6-10

But God gives all the more grace; therefore it says, ‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’ Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and the devil will flee from you. Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into dejection. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and God will exalt you.

The author of James’ letter gives instructions to the early Jesus community on how to live a life that is in tune with God’s will, not each person’s own willfulness. It could just as well be a blueprint for the twelve-step recovery process today. Tonight I’m going to talk about three central, guiding concepts that form a pathway to freedom from addiction through recovery: Awareness, Acceptance, and Action. These concepts are embodied in the twelve steps and they are explained succinctly by the author of James.

As we just heard, verse 6 of the fourth chapter of James begins with grace. James tells us that grace is God-given, not something we earn or work toward.

For addicts, alcoholics, compulsives, God's grace is the gift of awareness. We become aware of our powerlessness over the substances, behaviors, attitudes, and unhealthy relationships that are dragging us down, severely diminishing the quality of our lives, and ultimately trying to kill us. We can't be in accord with God's grace if we're proud, James tells us, if we try to go it alone and say to ourselves, "I can handle it." As it says in How It Works in the A.A. Big Book, "there is only one power who can handle everything, and that is God. May you find God now."

So in surrendering our pride, our will, to God, in coming to awareness and saying, I CAN'T handle this, I need your help, God, we are able to enter into a state of humility, of humbleness. Let's keep in mind the critical difference between humiliation and humility or humbleness. Humiliation is something that can happen to us at the hands of other people out of cruelty, but also is something that we can bring down on ourselves when we make fools of ourselves by behaving inappropriately. It happens a lot to drunks and addicts, and I should know because I humiliated myself many times during my years of active alcoholism and addiction.

But by becoming humble, we accept our limitations and open ourselves to receiving help—and this is where God's grace has an opportunity to enter in. We open ourselves and God fills us with healing, with grace, and most importantly with willingness. By becoming willing, we come to awareness that we are alcoholics—or addicts or compulsives or codependents—and cannot manage our problem by ourselves. So that's Awareness. And once we gain that awareness, we have taken the first step to

accepting that with God's help, we can be freed from our compulsions, from our fear and our pain and from however we're feeling stuck and trapped. That's Acceptance. As James describes it, we draw near to God, and in response God draws near to us, because God loves us, we are God's beloved children and God passionately desires to be in relation with us. And it is through this relationship with God that we are able to do what James also instructs us: Resist the devil—the forces of destruction and self-destruction that are all around us and within us—resist these forces by accepting God's embracing love, and the forces of evil, the devil, will flee from us. In AA you sometimes hear a very simple mantra shared: I can't handle it, God, you can, I turn it over to you. This is awareness, acceptance, and the final piece of the triangle, Action, all in one. We resist the devil—the things that bedevil us, our own personal demons—by turning them over to God in an action that is both an admission of powerlessness and a demonstration of the great power we can gain by being in accord with God's will.

But how do we do this? The author of James tells us to cleanse our hands, to purify our hearts. This is an outward cleansing—of behaviors, of going back to the same old destructive patterns and people, places, and things. It is also an inward cleansing by which we open our hearts to God's love and turn away from our fears. The author knows that we are double-minded, that there is always a part of us that wants to turn back toward the compulsions and behaviors that provide quick fixes and seem in the short run to make things better, make us feel better. When we give these up, James' author warns us that we will mourn, we will grieve as if we are giving up our best friend, our lover, our life blood, our very heart and soul. But we're mourning a false relationship. And the laughter that James' author tells us to give up is the bitter laughter of our addictions and

compulsions. It's a false laughter, the kind of laughter we have at the expense of others. And when he tells us to turn away from our joy, it's the kind of joy that is artificially induced, like the high from a drink or a drug or misuse of a credit card or blowing your paycheck on gambling or paying for sex or eating to stuff your feelings any other compulsive, destructive behavior. These aren't true joy or genuine laughter. So when we give these up, the author of James knows that we will lament and mourn and weep, that we'll feel dejected and lament. In other words, we'll go into withdrawal for a while. We'll go through all the stages of grief: denial, bargaining, anger, and on and on. We'll be angry, very angry, we'll lash out, particularly at anyone who's trying to help us. We'll blame everyone and everything but ourselves, because we don't want to face our responsibility for ourselves and our lives, refuse to accept responsibility for the results of the actions we've taken that have caused harm and damage to others, to our relationships, and even to ourselves.

This is the great reversal that the author of James describes, the need to turn our joy into sadness in order to open ourselves to God. We must strip away artificial joy and seeming happiness in order to achieve the real thing, and the stripping away process is sad and painful but so necessary. This is the basic reversal that is at the heart of the recovery process. We come to recovery worshipping the false gods of our addictions and compulsions, wrapped in an embrace of death with our demons and devils. The author of James describes how we are double-minded, our side turning toward death, toward destruction, toward addiction, the other side turning toward God. That addictive side, the side of our devils and demons, is so incredibly appealing, so "cunning, baffling, and powerful," as it says in the AA Big Book. But there is another side, the side where we

take Action to turn toward God and to make ourselves right, to walk in God's path and experience God's love and God's unimaginably great plans for each of us.

As the AA Promises state, God can and will do for us what we could not do for ourselves. And the Promises tell us, these are not extravagant promises. They are being fulfilled for millions in the recovery community, sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly—all we need to do is work for them. If we work for God, if we turn toward God, if we humble ourselves to God, anything and everything becomes possible. If we just get out of our own way, we can experience such great empowerment by letting God work through us and in us to radically transform our lives. The twelve steps give us a roadmap for how to do this. And it didn't start with recovery, because that roadmap is right there in the Gospels and Epistles, in the Hebrew Bible, in all of the world's religions. Living a life of faith, whatever your faith is, is all about getting your own self-centered, self-destructive needs out of the way, getting humble, so a spirit, a power greater than any of us can work wonders in us and through us for the betterment of the whole world.

Amen.

I want to close our service tonight with a ritual that will help us take a step toward awareness in each of our own lives.

I invite you to take a moment, open your minds and your hearts, and identify one thing in your life that you feel is keeping you from being as fulfilled as you believe you could be. Is it a behavior, a compulsion, an addiction, a relationship? Have you ever felt like your drinking is out of control, or your spending, or your approach to relationships and sex? Or is there someone close to you in your life, perhaps, who has a problem with alcohol, or drugs, or spending, or sex, or food? Think about just one thing that is holding



you back and write it on your index card. Some of you may feel you have nothing to write. Maybe you can't put your finger on anything but you still don't feel like you're reaching your full potential because of an underlying depression, or feeling of malaise, or lethargy, or sadness, or fear, or perhaps anger. Then write that emotion or feeling down.

By doing this exercise, we have taken a step toward Awareness, and by writing it down, we have taken a step toward Acceptance of whatever it is that is holding us back. Now comes the hard part, taking Action on this thing, this albatross, this personal cross we're bearing.

As a symbolic gesture, I invite you to turn it over. Literally. Turn over your cards. And now, in the middle of the back of your card, write one Action that you are willing to consider taking to help you let go of what you wrote on the other side of the card. Listen carefully to what I'm saying here. Think of one Action that you are willing to consider taking. Not willing to take. Not take. But willing to consider taking.

This is the first step toward willingness that anybody can take, becoming willing to be willing. But it is the greatest step, because it is the leap of faith. Maybe you'll consider going to a twelve-step program for a particular issue you're struggling with, Alcoholics Anonymous or Cocaine Anonymous, or Al-Anon, or Adult Children of Alcoholics, or Debtors Anonymous or Sexual Compulsives Anonymous. Maybe you'll start keeping a record of how you spend your money or develop a food plan to help you understand your eating patterns. Maybe you'll commit to detach with love from someone close to you who is in the clutches of their own disease, which you are powerless over, committing to realize that you can't fix anybody else and letting go might be the most loving thing you can do. Remember, write this Action in the middle of your card.

Now that you're written down that one Action that you're willing to take, and it's written as plain as day in the middle of the card, I invite you to join with me in writing these words at the top of your card:

God, grant me the willingness to consider taking the following action:

This is followed with the Action you have written down.

Now at the bottom of the card, I invite you to write Amen.

To conclude our ritual, I invite you to join in saying the standard, short version of the Serenity Prayer, found on your chairs.

God, grant me the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change, Courage to change the things I can, and Wisdom to know the difference.

And now, go forth from this place in peace and love, filled with the grace of God, the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

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#### **4. A Sermon on Steps Two and Three**

*"Eyes Wide Shut:  
A Meditation on  
Steps Two and Three"*

By Sophia Pazos

James 5: 7-20

Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of

the Lord. Indeed we call blessed those who showed endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful. Above all, my beloved, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your 'Yes' be yes and your 'No' be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation. Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest. My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

There was a drought for a long time. One morning, a woman kneels and prays for rain. After praying, she dresses to go out. Before leaving, she packs her galoshes and an umbrella.

I heard this story in college from a pastor during one of many intellectual roundtables held in colleges where young adults who know everything can expound deep thoughts and philosophies. Many of us sniggered at the woman's actions because faith such as hers was contrary to our reliance on science and rationalism. To be a person of faith seemed so primitive and naive. Professing atheism made more sense to my and my peers who have become jaded and cynical about the world we were inheriting.

Like many my age, I subscribed to this school of thought. Wallowing in self-pity I had lost my faith years before college. The committee in my head was working overtime,

blocking faith and hope from my heart. “Oh well” and “Yeah Right” pretty much summed up my worldview. And when I was at a loss for words, “How about another vodka?” fitted in these moments.

Faith in God’s will. Believing in a power greater than myself. Let Go and Let God, the AA slogan states. The Bible is filled with examples of the blind faith displayed by the woman during the drought. A hemorrhaging woman who believes that touching Jesus’ robe is enough is healed. A centurion appeals to Jesus to remotely heal his slave (some scholars say it was actually his lover); certain that Jesus’ word will be enough. Faith the size of a mustard seed can move trees according to Jesus.

But to me that mustard seed seemed like the size of a Hummer. It’s funny how the disease of addiction can play tricks with perspective. I entered a meeting for the first time and I swore the room was the size of a football field filled with 150 people. All of them were minimum six feet tall and they were all staring at me. As weeks went by, the room shrunk to the size of a living room, 150 became 30 and one particular giant AA’er who was an incredible ten years sober stood next to me to congratulate me on 90 days and she only came up to my eyebrows. It was my addiction that did everything to make AA big and scary and my drinking small and inconsequential. Small meetings were conventions and one cup of vodka filled a 24oz plastic cup.

That’s why it’s called blind faith. An addict’s perspective is so warped we have to be blind to find the faith in recovery. Persons with addictions see things as all good or all bad, black or white. The glass is always half empty, nobody loves us, understands us, and if they did understand us they would run away so let’s just have that next drink, drug or

one night stand. Let's run up that credit card, polish off a pint of ice cream and then overreact to an imagined slight to get our fix of drama.

Blind Faith, quite frankly, cuts through our BS. Coming to believe in a Higher Power and letting go and letting God allows us a reprieve from the dialogue in our heads. Blind faith brings on the silence that we need. It's like those sleep masks many people use. A simple piece of cloth and elastic, placed over the eyes, to achieve total darkness, which in turn allows for a truly deep and restful sleep. Actually blind faith is a misnomer because only when I came to believe in a Higher Power and turn my will and my life over to God is when my mind and my perspective become clear.

Now mind you, I've said nothing about blind faith making you happy or see everything through rose colored lenses. I still see the things in my life that aren't perfect. The moody refrigerator. My student loan debt. The fact that members of my family will not get better from their diseases. Blind faith doesn't hide the truth. It brings it up close and personal and it hurts. What blind faith does do is soothe the pain and take away the crazy notion I have that it's my job to fix everything going wrong around me. Blind faith may show me how dysfunctional some people are but it also shows me that God is here, with them and with me and in the end we are all in God's loving care. Blind Faith in short changes my job description from "God" to "God's Beloved."

As I said before, blind faith had left me years ago. I was being eaten up by my addictions and while I was counting days in AA I couldn't believe that there was a God that knew I existed and in whom I could turn my life over to. I was too used to being disappointed by people who said they would take care of me. I thought God would be no different. On June 29, 1997 some friends to an AA meeting on Christopher Street took

me. I had spent the night before drinking cheap vodka and trying to get a car to hit me. I don't know how but a friend found me, took me home and contacted my sponsor. The meeting was over and my sponsor and I went to watch the remnants of the Pride parade walking in. I was dirty, sunbathed, and EXTREMELY hung over. I hated myself for being weak and not being able to stop drinking. I hated AA because they were asking the impossible; they were asking me to believe in a Higher Power. Then I saw the clean and sober group come by. One man caught my eye. He was slight with long black hair and he didn't just walk he was dancing and vogueing. Seeing him sober and loving life opened the door to my faith. I wanted what he had and for a brief moment I believed that I could be happy and dancing too. I thank God everyday for bringing Valentin in my life for the first three years of my sobriety. Miss you mi amor.

To let go of my warped perspective. To let go of the responsibility of being always in charge, the great orchestrator of events. To let go of the voices that say I'm not deserving of love, compassion, happiness or even a good night's rest. Letting go and letting God is my aromatherapy, buckwheat filled eye mask that allows the silence and serenity to enter my life. In 12 step groups we have a prayer: God I offer myself to thee – to build with me and to do with me as Thou wilt. Relieve me of the bondage of self that I may better do THY will. Take away my difficulties, that victory over them may bear witness to those I would help of Thy power, Thy love, and Thy Way of Life. May I do thy will always.

This is my everyday prayer in good days and in bad days, during times of plenty and time of drought. I hope all of you can find the beauty and comfort of blind faith. And when the next dry spell hits, carry that umbrella.

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## 6. A Sermon on Steps 6 and 7

“Removing the Anesthesia, Performing the Surgery”

By the Rev. Paul Bradley

Philippians 3: 12-14

*Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.*

Philippians 2: 12-13

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Becoming entirely ready to have God remove all our defects of character sounds impossible. In reality we know that such perfection is out of human reach. This is another way of saying that we can do our best to work toward a lifelong goal that no one ever reaches until eternity. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul expresses a similar thought: “Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”

This combination of a positive attitude and an energetic effort is part of the mystery of our cooperation with God. Paul also says this to the Philippians: “Just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence,

work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

We need to practice these steps the rest of our lives, one day at a time. We don't have to demand perfection of ourselves, but we always have to keep moving ahead the very best we can, always challenging ourselves to move past the comfort zone into a place of challenge and growth, but never into a state of self-punishing misery.

Complacency is not an option for people in recovery, but neither is misery, because both are triggers to our former self-destructive behaviors and attitudes. Just as we have to keep moving forward, we have to avoid beating ourselves up too much, once we've been given the courage to change, for not changing everything about ourselves and our lives immediately, overnight! Remember, we are people given to quick fixes, to stuffing our feelings with substances, behaviors, relationships, anything to try to make a bad feeling go away.

But let's remember what the Big Book says in the Promises, our goal is “spiritual progress, not spiritual perfection.” No one, no human being, can achieve perfection and if we ever think we have, we are fooling ourselves and living in the character defect of grandiosity, big time. Even Jesus who we might assume to have lived a completely perfect and blameless life, went down to the Jordan to be baptized by John for his sins. What sins could Jesus have committed? And if **he** thought he was a sinner in need of rebirth and purification, who are we to hold on to our character defects, which is how the recovery movement views sins, how we look at sin. We aren't bad people trying to become good, we are sick people trying to become well. For us, sins are symptoms, markers of soul-sickness. We learn that our character defects will drag us down and kill



us if we don't let go of them. That's why we always need to work toward becoming all that God intends us to be as God's beloved and loving children. God will strengthen us and encourage us as long as we seek always to follow God's path, remembering that it is God's will, not ours, that we should be seeking to do.

This is the lesson of the sixth and seventh steps, willingness, readiness, and then just taking that great leap of faith. I know people who have gotten stuck on the sixth and seventh steps for years because they never feel ready enough, they hear the word "entirely" and think that it's an impossible goal and so they give up. But Paul's words to the Philippians show us how it works: to "let God be at work in you." In other words, get out of your own way, be willing to let your character defects go, and let them be replaced with what God desires for you, something wonderful, something beyond your wildest dreams. That empty place you filled with your addictive behaviors and your unhealthy relationships can be filled by God's light, by love and hope and possibility.

The title of my sermon for tonight, "Removing the Anesthesia, Performing the Surgery," recognizes that there is a trap door in this process, or what seems like one. In order to fully experience the gifts of recovery, to live in the new life that recovery can give us, we need to remove the anesthesia—the drink, the drug, the inappropriate relationship with food or sex or money, the inappropriate relationship with an addict, and alcoholic. We remove the anesthesia that prevents us from fully experiencing our own feelings, including our own pain, all the emotions and feelings, the colors and range and depth of a fully realized human experience that our addictive and compulsive behaviors dull and mask and anesthetize. And then, once the anesthetic has been removed, with God's help we work the steps of recovery eventually reaching Steps Six and Seven. Let's

review. Steps Six and Seven come after the first five Steps, where we have surrendered and turned our lives over to God, we've done a searching and fearless inventory and shared it with another person in the presence of God. After we've done all that, THEN we get to the place where we discover to our annoyance that in certain areas we are still encumbered, still weighted down and freighted and burdened with all our character defects that stopping drinking and acting out didn't eliminate—like our grandiosity, isolation, rage, fear, gossip, clutter, chaos, and all the other addictive and compulsive symptoms that were lurking below the surface of our primary addictions. So all that crap that's still with us surfaces and begins to become unbearable, it begins to gnaw at us, eat at us, it starts to drag us down—again!

This is where what David Crawford in his book *Easing the Ache* talks about the “bumps in the rug” starting to appear. We put down alcohol, and then our spending and debting begins to get out of control. Or we put on fifty pounds after we stop smoking because we replace nicotine with empty calories. Or we begin acting out sexually—our desire for God-given intimacy running out of control—all of this even though we're being poster children in our primary recovery programs—we're perfect little AA's or OA's or Al-Anon's but when it comes to something else, forget it! It's all connected: a character defect that we don't deal with will simply reemerge in another form somewhere else. We have to get to the root of our problems and deal, and that's the painful part, that's where the work is, that's where we need the support of a recovery program and, above all, God's help. So we stop procrastinating—another character defect, by the way, can anybody identify?—and realize that we are never going to be able to be any more

entirely ready than we are at this very moment. And then we pray to God to take away our defects of character, our shortcomings.

My sponsor, who led me through this process many years ago, described the feeling of taking the Sixth and Seventh Steps as being swept through a tunnel, and when I did it, sitting in the small chapel at Riverside Church right across the street, more than twelve years ago, praying to God to remove my character defects, that's just what it felt like. Sweeping through a tunnel, turning my life and my will over to God just like I had when I put down the drink and the drugs, now all over again in an even deeper way. And then the ride really began. Because for me, without my character defects to hold onto, I had to open myself to God performing surgery on my soul to take away the sickness and prepare the way for healing new growth to begin. So I took my Sixth and Seventh Steps and then I began to become very uncomfortable. There were issues I had put on the shelf and not dealt with as I was focusing on my primary addictions of alcohol and drugs—now they came back and demanded my attention. And here I was two, three years sober.

And so, more than ten years ago, I found myself in another fellowship other than A.A., for people in sexual recovery, S.C.A., and turned my life around in that area so that I was healed enough over five years ago to enter into a long-term, healthy, committed relationship that I continue to be in today and expect to remain in for the rest of my life, one day at a time, of course. But there's more. God still had more surgery to perform! My relationship with money was still unhealthy. No matter how much I had, it was never enough. So I went to another fellowship to deal with that issue, and am doing better but still on the path of recovery in terms of being completely sober in my relationship with money and debt. Progress, not perfection. But consciousness and stripping away the

denial is always the first step on the road to recovery, and at least I've taken that. The point is, we need to be open, willing, honest, and fearless, we need to be brave, to trust that God will always take care of us, God will always carry us, that Jesus will stay with us in our struggle at the margins of our own lives and sustain us through the most difficult trials and challenges. There is nothing we can't face with God's help, with Christ at our side, with the Spirit indwelling in us. This is the simple, basic truth of the Sixth and Seventh Steps, and the basic truth of Jesus' message: nothing is impossible if we let God into our lives and let God do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. As the A.A. Big Book states: "Are these extravagant promises? We think not. They are being fulfilled among us, sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly. They will always materialize if we work for them."

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## **7. A Sermon on Step Twelve**

**"In Our Weakness Is Our Strength"**

By the Rev. Paul William Bradley

2 Corinthians 12 5b-10

"On my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong."

In Second Corinthians 12:9, Paul tells us that “power is made perfect in weakness.” Sometimes this line is translated as “my strength is made perfect in weakness.” This leads us to the title of my reflection for tonight, “In our weakness is our strength.” This central message of our Christian faith is also central to our very survival as alcoholics and addicts in recovery from addictions, compulsions, and destructive behaviors, attitudes, and relationships. It starts with Step One. We admit our powerlessness over these substances, these behaviors, these attitudes, these relationships that demonize us and bedevil us, that drag us down, that destroy our spirit, our lives, our very essence. We say, God, I am weak. I am power-less. A few lines earlier, Paul describes how we can be boastful, we can feel elated, but to keep us from ever being too elated, we’re given thorns in our flesh, messages from Satan, visitations from our demons. And we pray to God to have our thorns leave us, to be freed of our demons. Paul appeals to God three times and God responds that God’s grace is sufficient, that power is made perfect in weakness. In order for the spirit of God to dwell in us, for us to be filled with Christ, we need to be weak. It’s that paradox of our relationship with God, and it’s the paradox of addiction and recovery. In order to have the strength to live without our demonizing influences, we have to let go absolutely, we have to surrender all and let God’s love fill us and flood us and work in us. Transform us. In weakness we find strength. At the moment we hit bottom, when we say, we are powerless and can’t do it by ourselves anymore, that is the moment of greatest strength.

I remember the moment of my intervention when I hit bottom after acting out at work, being drunk on the job and then calling in sick for a week afterward. When I came back to an intervention by my boss and was sent to our Employee Assistance Program

counselor, that wonderful therapist told me what sounded horrible at the time but was said in such comforting tones, someday you will look back on this as the moment you hit bottom. What I didn't understand is that from the bottom, we start to go up. And now nearly fourteen years after that day and with nearly that many days of continuous sobriety behind me and with me, I can see how far down I had gone and what a journey going "up" can be—a journey with no limit when you let go and let God do for you what you cannot do for yourself.

We need bread for this journey, our journey of recovery. Spiritual bread, practical bread, sustenance of mind, body, spirit. We need to learn how to take care of ourselves, sometimes for the very first time. I didn't know how to eat properly when I first stopped using. I had binged and purged—an eating disorder was part of the manifestation of my disease of compulsion—so I had to learn to eat healthy foods in moderate portions at regular intervals. I ate too much sometimes and had to learn how to eat less and remain satisfied and not feel deprived. I had to embrace my weaknesses, as Paul tells us we must. I had to practice acceptance. So we need to feed ourselves, and not just in a physical sense. We need spiritual sustenance as well. We need a spiritual life, a spiritual discipline. When many of us come into AA or other Twelve Step programs, we often feel spiritually bankrupt, at least at first. We need to recognize the Higher Power at work in our lives and begin to practice spiritual disciplines, whatever form they take. We start praying, maybe only at meetings. We begin to practice meditation in some form to center ourselves and find the places of peace and tranquility we need to begin to be comfortable in our own skins. We need the tools of recovery as found in the Twelve Steps, the slogans, and program literature and related recovery writing such as the AA Big Book,

Hope and Recovery from SCA, The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of AA or OA, Patrick Carnes' great book, *A Gentle Path through the Twelve Steps* or David Crawford's *Easing the Ache*.

We supplement the spiritual disciplines we learn in Twelve Step recovery by becoming part of a faith community, a worshipping group. That could be a local church. We might start going to the church for NA meetings in its basement. Maybe one day we go upstairs into the sanctuary and attend a Sunday service. Our faith community can be Step By Step. We might become active in another religion, another spiritual tradition. We enrich our spiritual life through the scripture, tradition, liturgy, music, hymns, prayers, of a faith community. We open as many doorways and windows in our hearts, minds, and souls to let God's love and light flood into our lives and turn our weakness into strength. The paradox and miracle of faith, and of recovery, is the more we open ourselves to God's will, the greater is our power to do good, and the more joy and fulfillment we feel. So let's join Paul in boasting of our weaknesses, our wounded places, our imperfections, for those are the places that we can open for God to work wonders in our lives.

Let's pray.

Closing Ritual: Paul tells us: "I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong." What is my weakness? How can my weakness become my strength?

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## 8. A Sermon for the Lenten Season

### “Diving Into the Wreck”

By the Rev. Paul William Bradley

Let us pray:

God, Creator and Maker of us all, speak in the calming of our minds and in the longings of our hearts, by the words of my lips and in the thoughts that we form. Speak, O God, for your servants are listening. Amen.

I’m preaching tonight from one of the lectionary texts for this week, from the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 1 verses 9-15. Listen to the word of God:

#### Mark 1:9-15

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

We have taken an amazing journey with Jesus in a few short passages. In this Gospel, Mark, this passage is where we see Jesus for the first time, for this gospel (which some scholars believe is the earliest), doesn’t include the story of Advent or the nativity. Unlike the gospels of Matthew and Luke, there is no birth of the messiah, no virgin birth, no baby Jesus, no precocious adolescent Jesus questioning the teachers in the Temple in Jerusalem. Here is a full-grown Jesus, coming from Nazareth to be baptized by John. Jesus has come from another place to this place: that is all the gospel writer will tell us. He has come prepared to begin a new life, through the act of baptism.



But now, and with astonishing speed, we see how taking that action, choosing to be baptized, changes Jesus' life utterly. Let's imagine the scene together. Jesus and John are standing let's say waist deep in the Jordan River. John will have prayed with him and blessed him, as a preparation to both anoint and purify Jesus through the act of baptism – if we believe that Jesus was in need of any kind of purification. Regardless, he is about to be sanctified. John places his hand on Jesus' head and supporting him, gently lowers him into the water. For a moment Jesus is fully submerged, he cannot breathe. Does he open his eyes underwater and look around? Is he afraid as some of us are when we are in the water or underwater? Mark doesn't tell us. Jesus waits for John to release his hold so Jesus can come up out of the water again. That moment may have felt like an eternity.

But here is what Mark does tell us, loud and clear. Just as Jesus breaks through the surface of the water, he sees the heavens torn, ripped apart and coming down from heaven, the Holy Spirit, descending on him like a dove. This was no ordinary baptism. And there's more, now the voice of God comes, saying to Jesus, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." Now this statement resonates with historic meaning, reminding us of Isaiah 42:1, where God speaks of "my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations." It foreshadows God's intention for Jesus. But no sooner has Jesus been singled out in this way and identified by God as God's own Son than "immediately," in the words of the author of the Gospel, he is driven by into the wilderness by the Spirit of God that is now one with him.

Already, Mark has covered a great deal of territory in just a few verses: Jesus has been baptized, recognized by God, filled with the Holy Spirit, and now comes his banishment and temptation. For forty days, another marker with resonance from the Hebrew Scriptures, Jesus is in the wilderness, tempted by Satan, in the dangerous company of wild beasts, but all the while attended by angels. At the end of his time in the wilderness, Jesus returns with John the Baptist now taken into custody and Jesus beginning his ministry, proclaiming the good news that the kingdom of God is near, and calling on all who hear him to repent.

What are we to make of this story? While the other gospels give us far more detail and information about this period, we are left by the author of Mark with what seems more like a sketch, but a sketch of such elegant simplicity. It tells us all we need to know. We could read this account, not knowing the details that the other gospels tell us, and still get a powerful message of the power of God to transform our lives and ourselves in ways we could not imagine.

Let's focus on one part of this rich text and join together in thinking about what it means to be baptized. Let's do this by looking at baptism in broader sense than we understand it in our own tradition or sacrament, of infant or adult baptism. For example, in a more secular sense we often speak of a "baptism by fire" when someone makes it through a rough initiation or transition. We also go through baptisms of fire when we are confronted by one of our personal demons, by any kind of temptation, and we don't surrender to that temptation. This is where we can get a sense of what Jesus was up against in the desert, in the wilderness. For an addict or alcoholic, like me, temptation

can take the form of a signal to pick up drugs or a take a drink. For a person who has struggled with spending problems, like me, it can be accepting an offer a new credit card even when they're already maxed out. For someone with an eating disorder, like me, that demon can take the form of a whole Entenmann's cake. For a compulsive gambler, not me—not yet anyway—the temptation is to buy a lottery ticket, and for someone who has quit smoking it can be deciding to light up just one cigarette. We know where that can lead, any of us addictive-compulsive types who don't know the meaning of “just one” anything!

But there is hope in the wilderness, just as there was for Jesus, tempted by Satan but with angels always in attendance. We too have a way we can face down those demons, and it is a God-given way, by using tools like the Twelve Steps of recovery with the help of God and other people like us who are also struggling to overcome addictions and compulsions one day at a time. We can face down even the deadliest of those demons by using the simple tools of the recovery movement, by admitting that we are powerless over our demons, that these addictions, these compulsions are making our lives unmanageable, miserable. We can confront the demonic, satanic temptations that would reduce the quality of our lives or even threaten our lives simply by saying to God, I can't handle this, you can, relieve me of my compulsion.

When we face down our demons, we are encounter our own wilderness moments. And if we make it through our own forty days and forty nights in the desert, we come out the other side with a deeper strength and a renewed commitment, a recommitment to the core values and beliefs and behaviors and attitudes that we know will make us healthy, happy, that will make God “well pleased” with us, God's beloved children.

In recovery, we go into our own baptisms by fire and our wilderness moments every day and one day at a time, taking it on faith that if we do what the poet Adrienne Rich called “diving into the wreck” that we will come out alive with the strength to face what next. There is no guarantee that we will come out unscathed—even Jesus had quite a set of surprises coming to him when he let John the Baptist hold his head under the water. He came out to find that his days of preparation whatever they might have entailed were over and his time of public witness and ministry were about to begin. He would hear directly from his parent, God, and he would go on to battle his own demons, whatever they were, for forty days in the wilderness, in the company both of wild animals and of angels, threats and protectors both in attendance.

I ask you, isn't that what we face in our lives every day? We are confronted with choices whose ramifications are tremendous. We are given the chance to do the right thing or to do very questionable things. Generally speaking, I would suggest that most of us do choose the right thing because ultimately and in the long run, it is more comfortable to turn toward goodness, toward God, toward life, toward affirmation, than it is to live with our demons, our compulsions and addictions, our unhealthy attitudes and beliefs and relationships. But in the short run, it often feels like it did for Jesus, like the opposite is true. If Jesus had chosen, assuming he had a choice, not to go to the Jordan and John the Baptist, had chosen not to be baptized, would all the rest have followed? Would the heavens have opened up and God spoken to him, would he have been cast into the wilderness and faced Satan and his demons, would he still have been able to go back and preach the gospel of God's universal, all-encompassing and reconciling love to all and for all? Would he? Could he? And would the end of his Lenten journey, and ours, forty

days hence, have been the same, which was God's ultimate sacrifice of God's only child, on the cross, for the sins of all humankind on Good Friday? And what followed on Easter morning, the defeat of the power of death by Christ's resurrection? Yes, Jesus had choices to make, just like we do. And he chose to do the next right thing. That meant he went down into the Jordan to be baptized. And from there Jesus went out into the wilderness and wrestled with his demons. And strengthened from that struggle, Jesus came out of the desert and began proclaiming the good news. And for preaching his radical message of love and reconciliation and peace and inclusion for everybody, for all of God's creation, Jesus would die on the cross at the hands of fearful humankind and then he would be resurrected. And if we want to fulfill our destinies, and do what God intended and created us to be in all our fullness, we also have to do what we have to do.

This, I would like to suggest, is our call from God for this Lenten season, for this journey that we take together of forty days from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday. We may not like it, and it may not always be comfortable, but if we are to continue to grow spiritually we must continue to look fearlessly, searchingly, honestly at ourselves and our lives to seek out and then cast out our own demons all the while praying for clarity and understanding of God's will for each of us. Amen.

#### BENEDICTION

Go in peace, love and care for one another in the name of Christ;  
and may the Spirit of God show you the path you should walk  
may the Word of God provide you with wisdom and knowledge

and may the Love of God direct all your actions and thoughts and words Both now and forevermore. Amen.

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## **9. Sermon for a non-Christian Recovery Audience about Faith**

### **PRESENTATION TO A RECOVERY CONFERENCE OR CONVENTION SPECIFICALLY GEARED TOWARD LGBT PEOPLE**

#### Background:

Several years ago I led a workshop on “Discovering, Uncovering, and Recovering Our Spirituality in Recovery” at the Big Apple Roundup, an annual conference of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people in Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-Anon in the New York region. The conference, which takes place over the Thanksgiving weekend draws attendees from throughout the nation. I have led workshops at these gatherings before, and the structure of the workshops calls for the leader to give a twenty to thirty minute presentation on the topic, drawing on his/her own experience and on other resources. I took this opportunity to deliver what was in effect (but not in name) a teaching sermon on the good news of God’s love for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people in recovery.

The Big Apple Roundup is jointly sponsored by Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-Anon Family Groups. Because of A.A.’s stated purpose, as well as Al-Anon’s, to remain unallied with “any sect, denomination, politics, organization, or institution,”<sup>355</sup> it would

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<sup>355</sup> All A.A. quotations are from *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, YEAR).

not be appropriate to proselytize in this setting. I am very mindful of a desire on my part to evangelize, I walked a fine line between proclaiming the gospel of Christ and sharing my own experience of a loving God and Christ and a church that embraces, accepts, and affirms me and my sexuality. My goal was to share my own experience of healing using examples from my own faith journey and to open a dialogue about some commonly held beliefs (particularly among people in recovery and queer people) about organized religion, which has driven so many gays and lesbians away from the church. I hope that my words helped participants in the workshop to explore issues their own issues of faith with more open minds.

A recovery ministry leader wishing to use the following sermon as a guide would need to substitute her or his own recovery journey for mine, but the general structure and message remains applicable.

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Sermon/Lecture:

“Discovering, Uncovering, and Recovering  
Our Spirituality in Recovery”  
By the Rev. Paul William Bradley

Hi, I’m Paul and I’m an alcoholic. I’m also a gay man. Since you signed up for this workshop, I guess you’re probably not completely intimidated by the idea of spirituality as part of the recovery process. I want to share a little of my story with you as it relates to spirituality and faith today and bring up a few ideas for us to consider.

I’ll begin with a short version of my A.A. “qualification” – how I got here, what I lost because of my drinking, the role of my faith in God and my active membership in my

church as part of my continued recovery process. [Told my story for five minutes.] My own spiritual awakening happened two years after I came into A.A., on Thanksgiving Day 1992 at The Riverside Church, where I experienced gratitude for all that God had done for me and became grateful for the first time in my life.

This experience followed a return, in recovery, to the church, which I had stopped attending after college. It was comforting to be back in a faith community and to worship God in the way that was familiar to me. I understood that in all my years of drinking and repeatedly endangering my life, God had been with me, carrying me, because God is to be found at the margins, in solidarity with the outcasts, the poor, the homeless, the disenfranchised, the alcoholic, the prostitute [mentioned as a reference to Luke 4:18 and other passages, describing Jesus' ministry without naming him].<sup>356</sup>

My awakening experience, where I felt the presence of God in my life, came after I had been in recovery for two years and after I had just spent a long period of time doing my 4<sup>th</sup> Step, the “searching and fearless moral inventory,” and had just the day before completed my 5<sup>th</sup> Step, in which I shared my inventory “with God and with another human being,” my A.A. sponsor. The purpose of these steps is to identify our wrongs and our shortcomings and then, through the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Steps, which I did in the form of prayer in the small chapel of my church the next day, to let God “remove all these defects of character” – a necessary process to “clear the decks” to allow God to work in our lives to help us achieve fulfillment and fullness as people no longer encumbered by the active state of our alcoholism and addiction.

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<sup>356</sup> All biblical references from the New Revised Standard Edition of the Bible.



In the Hebrew Bible, which is also called the Old Testament by many, the prophet Isaiah [61:1-2] tells us that God will “bring good news to the oppressed” and that is just what happened to me first when I walked in the doors of my first meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous, and again and again after that incredible first day, as God opened my eyes to the beauty of the world and the miracle of my place in it. In A.A., I ceased feeling oppressed by my addiction and the demons it tortured me with. I became happy to be alive, grateful to be a part of creation, and wanting to learn what my place and my role, in the world was supposed to be now that I had been saved from what a very special spiritual advisor of mine, Dr. James Washington, described in what seemed to me to be very biblical terms as “the jaws of perdition!”

It is wonderful to have experience the feeling that God loves you, and it was the rooms of A.A. that first gave me that sense of love, in the unconditional love that each of you gave me when I came in, on my knees, unable to love or help myself and there you were to lift me up, to tell me I was going to be all right, that I could make it without alcohol or drugs.

I had a different but similar experience when I went into the church that became my home congregation, The Riverside Church. It’s a big place, for those of you who haven’t been there, designed in the grand style of a Gothic cathedral. It can seem very forbidding, sort of like the church and God can be for many of us. But as I sat in the pew, a nice straight couple welcomed me, asked me my name, and encouraged me to go to the coffee hour and to come back to Riverside again. In the pew, next to the hymnals was Riverside’s “Statement of Inclusion,” written way back in the 1970s, which says that gays and lesbians are welcomed and affirmed there.

And then, from the pulpit, Dr. James Forbes, pastor of Riverside Church, preached a sermon whose subject had nothing to do with homosexuality – I confess I don't remember his topic – but in the middle of it he made a statement about his gay and lesbian brothers and sisters and how we are all one family and there is no place for hatred, discrimination, or exclusion. His words moved me very deeply, because in all the years I had sat in church pews, singing the hymns and praying the prayers of parents and grandparents, of my own childhood and adolescence, in all those years I had never felt affirmed as a gay man, as a gay person of faith, as a gay Christian before.

So I decided to come back to the church, to join The Riverside Church, and on the day I joined I wore a red ribbon, as a way of signaling solidarity with people with AIDS, and because at that time for a man to wear the ribbon generally signified that he was gay. I wanted to make a statement and be accepted for myself, one hundred percent, from the get-go. Since that day, everything I have done at Riverside, every committee I have served on, every public statement I have made, has been as an openly gay man and it has given me a new vision of what church can be, what a life of faith can be, if it includes those who are historically excluded. My understanding of a faith community, of church, has been broadened by my experience in an open and affirming, inclusive, embracing congregation like Riverside.

At Riverside, I began to become acquainted with a different face of Christianity than I had been brought up to see. I discovered the Christ who challenged the establishment of his time by pushing boundaries, by broadening the circle of those who were included. Jesus touched people who had historically been considered unclean by the people of his faith – lepers, Samaritans, prostitutes. He healed people on the Sabbath

rather than letting them suffer for the sake of observing a commandment that he felt was less vital than the ministry of love that he was called to perform. He included women in roles that were not traditionally open to them, and they became deacons of the new church. It was women – Mary, Joanna, and Mary Magdalene, who did not desert Christ at the cross, and who first discovered that his tomb was empty and that he had risen – and they were the first to spread the good news.

Jesus told us [Matthew 7: 1-2] “do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.” Jesus’ Apostle, Paul [2 Corinthians 5: 18-19] told us that “God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ. . . has given us the ministry of reconciliation. . . not counting [our] trespasses against [us], and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.” These have been some of my experiences in a welcoming church which struggles to make sure that even when people see things differently, all are given a voice and all are treated as family.

I challenge us to take another look at spirituality, faith, and religion, but not focusing on the religious institutions that oppressed us in the past, because the things that have been done in the name of religion, of Christianity, of Protestantism, have been atrocious, from inquisitions, to slavery, to the Holocaust to gay-bashing and murders of gays, crimes perpetrated by invoking the name of the Bible today. I have learned that the Bible says many things and not all of them affirming all people. Many biblical passages have been used to oppress people rather than to lift us up. Now, we can’t pretend that scripture doesn’t “say” that homosexuality is a sin, such as in Leviticus [20: 15] which states that “a man lying with a man as with a woman” is a capital offense, punishable by

death, along with many others, such as that of a man committing adultery with a neighbor's wife, a crime for which both sex partners must be put to death. But we can refute an ancient text like this by saying that we don't execute, or for that matter, even prosecute, people for adultery anymore, so why should we still want to punish or kill men who prefer to sleep with other men? But ultimately these kinds of legal arguments are beside the point, although it's always good to have some in your arsenal, in case you ever find yourself being interrogated by your boyfriend's brother who is a member of the Christian Coalition! I have learned that God's most valuable gift is not a series of laws or commandments, of don'ts, shoulds and should nots. God's most important gift to us is the message of love.

Jesus said, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" [John 13: 34-35]. If we dispense with our labels – black and white, man and woman, gay and straight, what are we left with? Perhaps only that we are beloved children of God, each of us created perfectly just as we were meant to be by our Maker in God's own image. And if we strive to live in a world ruled by love and mutual respect for one another instead of exclusion, oppression, and hatred, wouldn't that be a better place to be?

In A.A., we learn to turn around all our thinking. We go from believing "I have no choice but to drink myself to oblivion or death, my life is meaningless, I am unwanted, unloved, unworthy" to "I deserve to be alive. I have purpose in my life. I'm a winner. I have choices. Every day is a new day. I am loved by the fellowship and by the God of my understanding." I'd like to suggest that there are valuable tools for living to be found in looking with new eyes at the very words that have so long seemed to exclude

us, the Judeo-Christian scriptures that are part of many of our heritages. We the most marginal of all the marginalized, the drunks who are also queers – fags, dykes, trannies – the lowest of the low, in the eyes of many. But in fact, by our very marginalization, our otherness, our outcastness, we are shown to be God’s most beloved, God’s chosen, and as such, we have some rather revolutionary good news to spread around!

Thank you for letting me share some of my spiritual journey in recovery with you. I look forward to hearing from all of you. And I thank you all, and God, for my sobriety, which makes all of this possible.

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## **Conclusion**

It is our hope this manual has provided useful resources and food for thought and inspiration for ministers and congregations seeking to reach out to people in recovery and to experiment with the rich possibilities of Twelve Step Christian recovery ministries. We hope you will take these suggestions as just that and develop your own unique styles and forms and that you will share them with us so we can continue to expand the offerings available for our faith communities.

Blessings to each of you, strength for the journey, and let the peace of God be with you.

## **APPENDIX B: PROJECT DOCUMENTATION**

## APPENDIX B: PROJECT DOCUMENTATION

### Outreach to Manhattan Churches

Letter sent to 117 churches in Manhattan that host Alcoholics Anonymous meetings:

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Step By Step  
A Ministry of Recovery and Healing  
c/o New York Theological Seminary  
475 Riverside Drive, Suite 500  
New York, NY 10115

March 2006

Dear Colleague in Ministry,

I am writing to introduce you to a special ministry that I hope you and members of your congregation may find helpful and of interest. Step By Step is a Christian ministry that uses the Twelve Steps of the recovery movement (developed by Alcoholics Anonymous more than 70 years ago and followed by many other Twelve Step fellowships in the years since) in a program of worship. We currently meet twice a month on Tuesday evenings in two sites and are hoping to expand to additional sites in the months ahead. Step By Step was founded in 2000 by the late Rev. Dr. Annie Ruth Powell, Seminary Pastor of Union Theological Seminary, and I continued this important work after Dr. Powell's passing in 2001. We are now in our sixth year of ministry to people struggling with addictions, compulsions, and unhealthy behaviors, attitudes, and relationships. In monthly worship services and weekly meetings, we combine Christian belief and worship with Twelve Step spirituality. Our services include prayer, sacred music, scripture, preaching, and personal testimony by congregants on issues of living as Christians in recovery. Members of all Twelve Step programs are especially welcome, and we also welcome any who would simply like to learn more about the Twelve Steps as tools for spiritual growth and development. Ours is an inclusive ministry, with services open to all, and people from a wide diversity of backgrounds have found renewal in our ministry. Attendance at these meetings, and what is shared there, is confidential. Finally, Step By Step sees one of its primary roles as providing a bridge or gateway from the rooms of Twelve Step recovery into the church sanctuary, and vice versa. While Tuesday night Step By Step worship services may serve as a destination for some, they are also help acquaint others with Christian worship or with the tools of Twelve Step recovery.

I have enclosed a few copies of our current flyer for Step By Step and invite you to share this information with members of your congregation or community who you feel might benefit from our ministry. We have found that in addition to sharing copies with particular congregants, posting a flyer on your community announcements bulletin board or including a notice in your worship bulletin provides a way to let people know about

this resource in a way that permits them to keep their interest private and confidential. Since I know that you host Twelve Step meetings in your church, a public posting of this flyer would be a way of sharing pertinent information with the recovery community in your midst. I would welcome the opportunity to speak with you further about Step By Step and would also be happy to offer a Step By Step workshop for your congregation on a Sunday after worship or a weekday evening to give a chance for folks to experience this unique worship program first-hand. And if any members of your congregation would like to know more about our ministry or about recovery issues in general, please feel free to refer them to me at 212-870-1218 or pb@nyts.edu.

Grace and peace,

The Rev. Paul Bradley (U.C.C.)  
Minister, Step By Step

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Application to the Wellness Center of The Riverside Church to establish a new Step By Step site:

## *The Wellness Program*

AT THE RIVERSIDE CHURCH

\* 490 Riverside Drive, New York, NY 10027 \* tel. 212/870-6758 \* fax 212/870-6800 \*

\* e-mail: [wellness@riversidechurch.net](mailto:wellness@riversidechurch.net) \*

H:\Step By Step-Riverside-Program Proposal (E-Mail Copy).doc

## Program Proposal Form

*Please include information in the gray boxes below*



### *Section 1: CONTACT INFORMATION*

**Main Contact Person for Program:** Rev. Paul Bradley

**Organization (if applicable):** Step By Step Recovery Ministry

**Phone:** 212-870-1218    **Cell Phone/Alternate #:** 917-453-1094

**E-Mail Address:** pb@nyts.edu

**FAX Number:** 212-870-1236    **Best way to contact you?** Phone

**Address:** New York Theological Seminary, 475 Riverside Drive, Suite 500,  
New York, NY 10115



### *Section 2: PROGRAM PROPOSAL*

**Class Title:** Step By Step: A Ministry of Recovery and Healing

**Workshop Leader:** Rev. Paul Bradley

**Workshop Leader Phone Number:** 212-870-1218

**Include in Brochure?** Y ☒ N ☐

**Workshop Leader E-mail:** pb@nyts.edu

**Include in Brochure?** Y ☒ N ☐

**Detailed Description of Program for promotional materials:** A ministry for all people striving for spiritual wholeness, Step By Step integrates the tools of the Twelve Step Recovery Movement developed by Alcoholics Anonymous with Christian principles, practice, and worship. In monthly workshops and worship services, Step By Step offers doorways to freedom from compulsive, destructive, and addictive behaviors and attitudes that prevent us from reaching our fullest potential as beloved and loving children of God. Step By Step's ministry crosses the boundaries of all addictions and all compulsions, using the wealth of wisdom offered by many different Twelve-Step programs to help people deal with problems such as overeating and anorexia, problem drinking, gambling, drug use, spending and debting, sexual compulsion, rage, and unhealthy dependent relationships. A program of Union Theological Seminary, Step By Step was established in 2000 through the vision of by the late Rev. Dr. Annie Ruth Powell, Union's Seminary Pastor, and continues under the co-direction of the Rev. Paul Bradley and Ms. Sophia Pazos, Co-Ministers.

**If Yes, include following description in Brochure?** ☒ Y ☐ N

**Fee:** \$None **Please select one:** ☐ Fixed Fee ☒ Suggested Donation

☐ By Donation

**Workstudy or Scholarship available for participants?** Y ☐ N ☒

**If Yes please describe the terms:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Frequency of Program:** ☐ Weekly ☒ Monthly  
☐ Single Day ☐ Semi-Monthly ☐ Other  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Dates to offer the program (Please show proposed start & end dates. If a particular day of the week)** Sunday evening, 7:00 p.m. First meeting is on Sunday, June 11<sup>th</sup>.

**Do you have a minimum number of participants and a deadline for this?** N ☒ Y ☐

**If Yes, deadline? (1 week before event, etc.)** \_\_\_\_\_

**If Yes, describe:**

**Is there a pre-registration or pre-notification required?** N ☒ Y ☐ \_\_\_\_\_

**Promoting the programs is a partnership between the Wellness Center and Workshop leader.** Yes

**If selected how will you also promote tour programs, you also promote tour class/workshop?** We publicize the program through regular mailings to several hundred churches and past program participants, through e-mail to a list of several hundred individuals connected to various faith and Twelve-Step recovery communities. The program is publicized in the weekly bulletins of Metropolitan Community Church and Union Theological Seminary and is published in each of these organizations' annual calendars/handbooks of events and programs. It would be our hope that The Riverside Church would include a notice about Step By Step in the Sunday worship bulletin and in Wellness Center promotional materials.

**If so what are the ways you will be able to promote these programs?**  
See above.

**Would you be able to maintain a sign-in sheet for each class?** Yes

**If we haven't offered a program of yours in the Wellness Center before, please include the phone number and name of two references:**

Dr. Dale T. Irvin, President, New York Theological Seminary, 212-870-1223;  
Mr. Jim Hayes, Dean of Academic Administration, Union Theological Seminary, 212-662-2013

**Is your program particularly targeted to a special audience? (For example women, the elderly, youth, all fitness levels)** Step By Step is a ministry open to all, but it particularly targets people struggling with

addictions and compulsions such as alcoholism, drug addiction, debting and money issues, overeating and other food/body issues, as well as codependency, and the traumatic effects of being part of family systems in which addiction and compulsion have caused damage.

**If your program is listed in the brochure, do you have special needs for the space that it may be booked in?** A worshipful space is desired for this ministry.

**If you have offered this program at other venues please attach a list. Feel free to enclose any relevant brochures/flyers that may help us know your program better.**

Step By Step is currently offered on the first and third Tuesday evenings of every month in two settings: Lampman Chapel at Union Theological Seminary and Metropolitan Community Church of New York. In the fall, Step By Step will expand to Middle Collegiate Church as well.

**If we haven't offered a program of yours in the Wellness Center before, please include the phone number and name of two references**  
Dr. Dale T. Irvin, President, New York Theological Seminary, 212-870-1223;  
Mr. Jim Hayes, Dean of Academic Administration, Union Theological Seminary, 212-662-2013

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Thank you for thinking of the Wellness Center for your program. We will give it every consideration, and be in touch with you.

Please include a brief biography or resume about yourself as it pertains to the class you will be able to share in the promotion of this class. If so, what avenues will you use?

---

<i>FOR INTERNAL WELLNESS CENTER OFFICE USE ONLY</i>
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Status	<u>Approved</u>
ROOM ASSIGNMENT	<u>Meditation Chapel</u>
EBMS Initial Booking	<u></u>
EBMS CONFIRMATION	<u></u>
Service Order Requested?	<u></u>

Advertisement placed in Middle Collegiate Church bulletin, the Gay City News city-wide newspaper, and the Villager Greenwich village neighborhood papers.

# MIDDLE COLLEGIATE CHURCH

*Welcoming. Artistic. Inclusive. Bold.*

## DOING A BOLD NEW THING ON EARTH

**Step By Step Ministry**  
**A new Small Group Spiritual Service**  
**For those in recovery**

Monday | October 23 | 7 PM

**Worship Celebration**  
Sundays | 9:00 am | 11:15 am

**SoulCare**  
Wednesdays | 7:30 pm

**Visit us at 2nd Ave. @ 7th St.**

Find out more about us at [Middlechurch.org](http://Middlechurch.org)

Middle Church flyer for Step By Step:



Welcoming • Artistic • Inclusive • Bold

## NOW YOU CAN EXPLORE THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSION OF YOUR RECOVERY IN A SPECIALLY STRUCTURED WORSHIP

Part of recovery is healing. Part of healing is getting in touch with your spiritual side. This worship was designed to meet your unique spiritual needs.

It is a nondenominational service incorporating the steps and lessons from your 12 step group into a special service focused on coming together with others like you to help each other heal using prayer, meditation and worship.

This worship is now at Middle Church. So, come, join in and heal your spiritual self.

**Fourth Monday of every month at 7 PM**  
**(Except December, Third Monday!)**

Next dates | Oct 23 | Nov 27 | Dec 18 | Jan. 22 | Feb. 26 | Mar. 26 | Apr. 23 | May 21

**For more information:**

**Rev. Paul Bradley**—Co-Minister of Step by Step

212.870.1218 | [pb@nyts.edu](mailto:pb@nyts.edu)

**Rev. Freeman Palmer**—Minster, Congregational Life and Development

212.477.0666 | [fpalmer@middlechurch.org](mailto:fpalmer@middlechurch.org)

*Step By Step offers doorways to freedom from compulsive, destructive, and addictive behaviors, attitudes, and relationships—such as alcoholism, drug addiction, debting, eating disorders, sexual compulsion, codependence, gambling, and rage in a monthly worship setting.*

*Middle Collegiate Church is a celebrating, culturally diverse, inclusive and growing community of faith where all persons are welcomed just as they are as they walk through the door.*

## **APPENDIX C: SURVEY INSTRUMENTS**



## APPENDIX C: SURVEY INSTRUMENTS

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### The Cover Letter

#### *A. Online version*

*Dear Friend:*

I am writing to ask you to consider participating in a survey that will assist me in my doctoral research for New York Theological Seminary, where I am currently studying. Enclosed is an anonymous questionnaire that I have developed to gather information for my research on the relationship between religious practice and Twelve-Step spirituality. You are not being asked to give your name for this anonymous survey. Please return this electronically and return it to me, Paul B., by e-mail at [pb@nyts.edu](mailto:pb@nyts.edu). If you have any questions, please call me at 917-453-1094 or e-mail me at [pb@nyts.edu](mailto:pb@nyts.edu).

By way of personal disclosure, I am a member of the fellowship of A.A. and have been sober since 1991. I have done research at the master's level and now am pursuing doctoral work on religion, spirituality, and Twelve-Step recovery.

Many thanks in advance for your assistance.

Yours in recovery,

Paul B.

---

*B. Postal version*

**Bradley**  
**317 West 99<sup>th</sup> Street, Apt. 3A**  
**New York, NY 10025**  
[pb@nyts.edu](mailto:pb@nyts.edu)

*Dear Friend:*

I am writing to ask you to consider participating in a survey that will assist me in my doctoral research for New York Theological Seminary, where I am currently studying. Enclosed is an anonymous questionnaire that I have developed to gather information for my research on the relationship between religious practice and Twelve-Step spirituality. You are not being asked to give your name for this anonymous survey. Please return this electronically and return it to me, Paul B., by e-mail at [pb@nyts.edu](mailto:pb@nyts.edu). If you have any questions, please call me at 917-453-1094 or e-mail me at [pb@nyts.edu](mailto:pb@nyts.edu).

*You may also return this survey by mail to:*

Bradley  
317 West 99<sup>th</sup> Street, Apt. 3A  
New York, NY 10025

By way of personal disclosure, I am a member of the fellowship of A.A. and have been sober since 1991. I have done research at the master's level and now am pursuing doctoral work on religion, spirituality, and Twelve-Step recovery.

Many thanks in advance for your assistance.

Yours in recovery,

Paul B.

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The Survey

**QUESTIONNAIRE FOR PEOPLE WHO ATTEND TWELVE  
STEP GROUPS**

**Which of the following Twelve Step fellowships do you  
currently attend or have you ever attended (including online  
groups)?**

- ☐ Alcoholics Anonymous
- ☐ Al-Anon Family Groups/Alateen, etc.
- ☐ Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACOA)
- ☐ Overeaters Anonymous
- ☐ Narcotics Anonymous
- ☐ Debtors Anonymous
- ☐ Crystal Methamphetamine Anonymous
- ☐ Gamblers Anonymous
- ☐ Nicotine Anonymous
- ☐ Codependents Anonymous (CODA)
- ☐ Sexual Compulsives Anonymous/Sex Addicts  
Anonymous/Sexual Recovery Anonymous, or other "S"  
fellowships
- ☐ Others (specify)
- ☐ None

Are you currently attending a Twelve Step recovery fellowship  
(including online groups)? If so, which one(s):

**How often do attend Twelve Step recovery meetings (including  
online groups)?**

- ☐ Daily or more frequently
- ☐ Several times weekly
- ☐ Weekly
- ☐ Occasionally
- ☐ No longer attend

Do you consider yourself to be in recovery from, or abstaining from, any addiction, compulsion, or unhealthy relationship or behavior?

\_\_\_ **Yes**

\_\_\_ **No**

\_\_\_ **Maybe**

If so, can you name that or those addiction(s), compulsion(s), or unhealthy behavior(s) or relationship(s):

**If you do consider yourself to be in recovery or abstaining, how long have you been in recovery or abstaining?**

\_\_\_ Days  
\_\_\_ Months  
\_\_\_ Years

**What is your formal religious background or affiliation, if any:**

\_\_\_ Protestant (Specify your denomination, if any, i.e.,  
Lutheran, Pentecostal, Church of Christ, Methodist, AME,  
Unitarian Universalist, UCC, MCC, etc.)

\_\_\_ Roman Catholic  
\_\_\_ Eastern Orthodox

- ☐ Jewish (☐ Orthodox ☐ Conservative ☐ Reform ☐  
           Reconstructionist ☐ Other [specify])  
☐ Buddhist  
☐ Islam  
☐ Wicca  
☐ Other (specify)

**What is/was your family-of-origin's religious background, if any?**

- ☐ Protestant (Specify your denomination, if any, i.e.,  
           Lutheran, Pentecostal, Church of Christ, Methodist,  
           Unitarian Universalist, UCC, MCC, etc.)  
☐ Roman Catholic  
☐ Eastern Orthodox  
☐ Jewish (☐ Orthodox ☐ Conservative ☐ Reform ☐  
           Reconstructionist ☐ Other Jewish [specify])  
☐ Buddhist  
☐ Islam  
☐ Wicca  
☐ Other (specify)

**Do you currently attend religious services (at a church, synagogue, temple, etc.)?**

- ☐ Yes  
☐ No  
☐ Sometimes

**How often do you attend religious services?**

- ☐ Weekly or more frequently  
☐ Monthly  
☐ On holidays  
☐ Occasionally

**What is your ethnic/racial background?**

- ☐ African American or Afro-Caribbean

- ☐ Hispanic/Latino/Latina
- ☐ Asian/Asian American/Pacific Islander
- ☐ European American/Caucasian
- ☐ Native American/Inuit
- ☐ Other

**What is your gender?** \_\_\_\_\_

**What is your sexual orientation?**

- ☐ Heterosexual
- ☐ Bisexual
- ☐ Gay
- ☐ Lesbian
- ☐ Transgender
- ☐ Queer
- ☐ Intersex
- ☐ Questioning
- ☐ Same Gender Loving
- ☐ Not sure

**What is your age?** \_\_\_\_\_

**Have you ever attended a Twelve-Step-based religious service?**

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

**If so, which one(s)?**

- ☐ Step By Step
- ☐ Overcomers Outreach
- ☐ Celebrate Recovery
- ☐ Alcoholics Victorious
- ☐ Alcoholics for Christ
- ☐ Saturday Center for the Mentally and Emotionally Healing
- ☐ Other(s) (specify)

**Do you still attend a Twelve-Step religious service/recovery ministry?**

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Sometimes

**If so, which one(s)?**

**If you do currently attend a Twelve-Step religious service/recovery ministry, what keeps you coming back?**

- ☐ Integration of worship with recovery
- ☐ Deeper engagement in spiritual practice than is possible in Twelve Step groups alone
- ☐ Feel more comfortable expressing my religious beliefs with like-minded people in recovery
- ☐ Feel more comfortable expressing my recovery journey with people who share my religious beliefs or are on a similar spiritual path
- ☐ Gets back to A.A.'s spiritual roots in Christianity, original beliefs of Bill W., Dr. Bob and other early A.A.'s
- ☐ Singing hymns and religious songs in context of recovery
- ☐ Incorporating Scripture from the Bible into recovery
- ☐ Other

(These are only some suggested responses. Please feel free to add your own personal reasons below)

**If you used to attend a Twelve-Step religious service and stopped attending, what are some of the reasons you stopped attending?**

- ☐ Changes in my schedule make it difficult to attend meetings where and when they are held
- ☐ Turned off by organized religion and organized worship
- ☐ Too much like "church"
- ☐ Reminded me too much of the church/synagogue/temple I grew up in
- ☐ I have issues around past spiritual abuse

- \_\_\_ Doesn't nurture my spiritual growth as well as working the Steps in my own Twelve Step fellowship
- \_\_\_ I joined a more formal religious community: church, synagogue, temple, etc.
- \_\_\_ Twelve Step religious services go against the Traditions of A.A. and other Twelve Step Fellowships
- \_\_\_ Recovery should be "spiritual," not "religious"
- \_\_\_ I am afraid that Twelve Step religious services will endanger my sobriety/recovery
- \_\_\_ Twelve Step religious services are boring
- \_\_\_ Twelve Step religious services make me uncomfortable
- \_\_\_ I don't like the format of the services
  
- \_\_\_ I didn't like some things about the worship (check any that apply)
  - \_\_\_ reading Scripture from the Bible
  - \_\_\_ singing hymns
  - \_\_\_ use of piano
  - \_\_\_ use of guitar
  - \_\_\_ style of music
  - \_\_\_ unfamiliarity with music
  - \_\_\_ singing without accompaniment
  - \_\_\_ praying
  - \_\_\_ listening to sermons
  - \_\_\_ meeting in a worship space full of Christian imagery
  - \_\_\_ round robin sharing
  - \_\_\_ rituals
  - \_\_\_ writing and other Step-related exercises
  - \_\_\_ testimonies/testifying

*(These are only some suggested responses. Please feel free to add your own personal reasons below)*

**What might a Twelve Step recovery ministry offer you that would make you interested in attending?**

- \_\_\_ Location of meetings
- \_\_\_ Time of meetings
- \_\_\_ Worship leaders
- \_\_\_ Different worship style (give examples)



Please read the Mission Statement of Step By Step, a Twelve-Step recovery ministry, below.

A ministry for all people striving for spiritual wholeness, Step By Step integrates the tools of the Twelve Step Recovery Movement developed by Alcoholics Anonymous with Christian principles, practice, and worship. In monthly workshops and worship services, Step By Step offers doorways to freedom from compulsive, destructive, and addictive behaviors, attitudes and relationships that prevent us from reaching our fullest potential as beloved and loving children of God. Step By Step's ministry crosses the boundaries of all addictions and all compulsions, using the wealth of wisdom offered by many different Twelve-Step programs to help people deal with problems such as overeating and anorexia, problem drinking, gambling, drug use, spending and debting, sexual compulsion, rage, and unhealthy dependent relationships.

Does this Mission Statement make you more interested in attending a Step By Step meeting, less interested, or does it have no effect on your opinion?

- ☐ more interested in attending
- ☐ less interested in attending
- ☐ makes no difference in my opinion

Is there anything else about Step By Step that you would like to know that these statements have not told you?

Please use this space (or additional sheets) to add any further questions, comments, or reactions to this questionnaire.

**Thank you for your assistance!**

**—Paul B.**

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## **APPENDIX D: SURVEY RESULTS**

**APPENDIX C: SURVEY RESULTS**

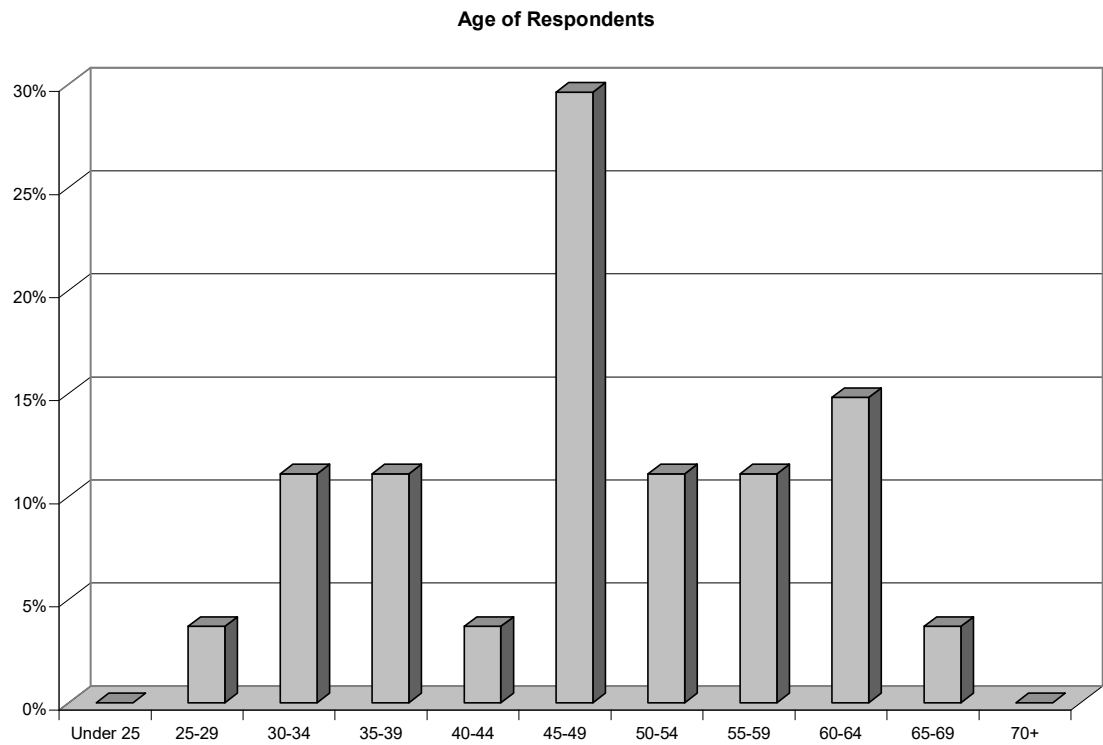


Figure 1

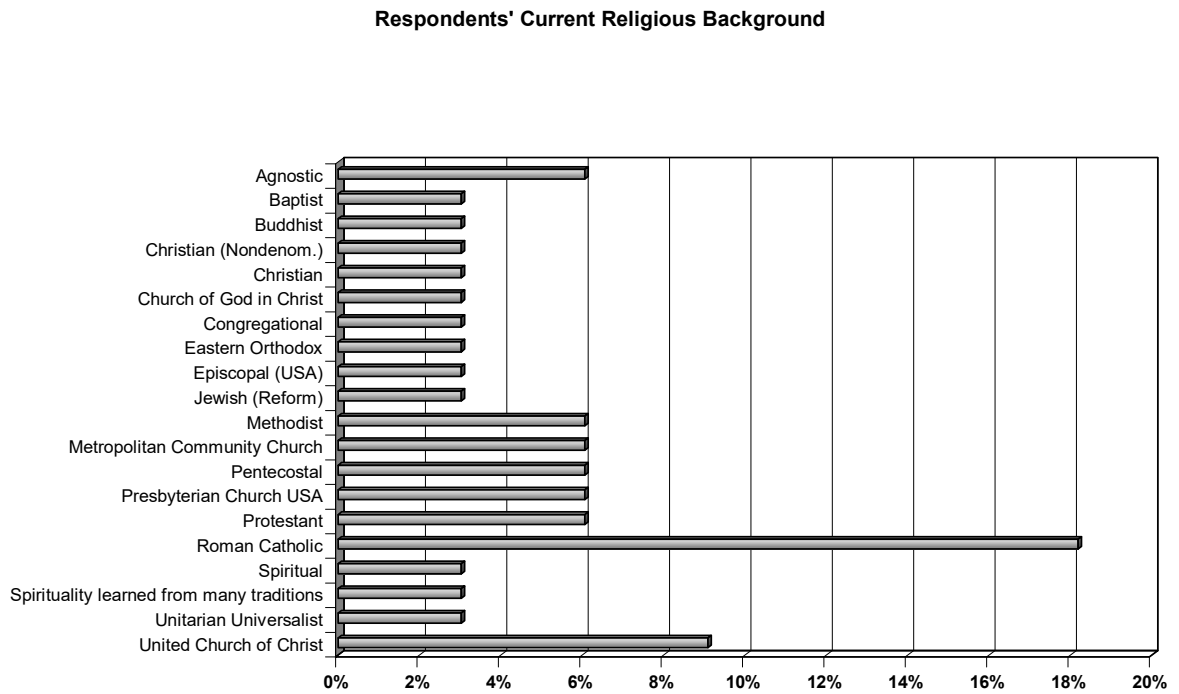


Figure 2

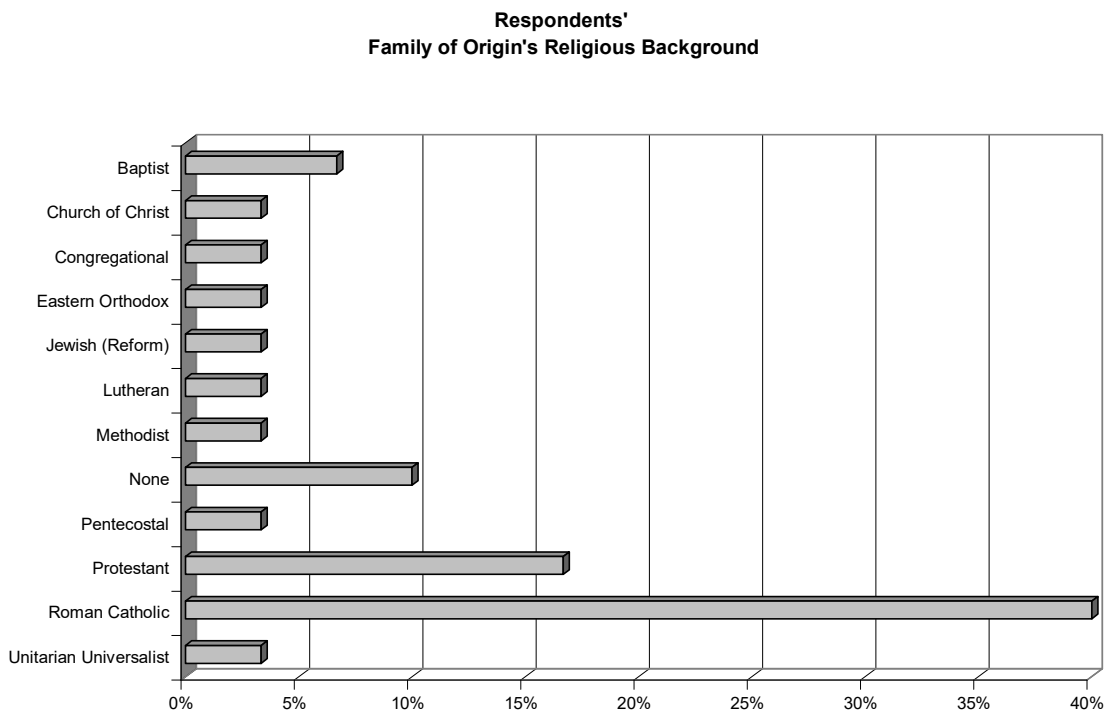


Figure 2-A

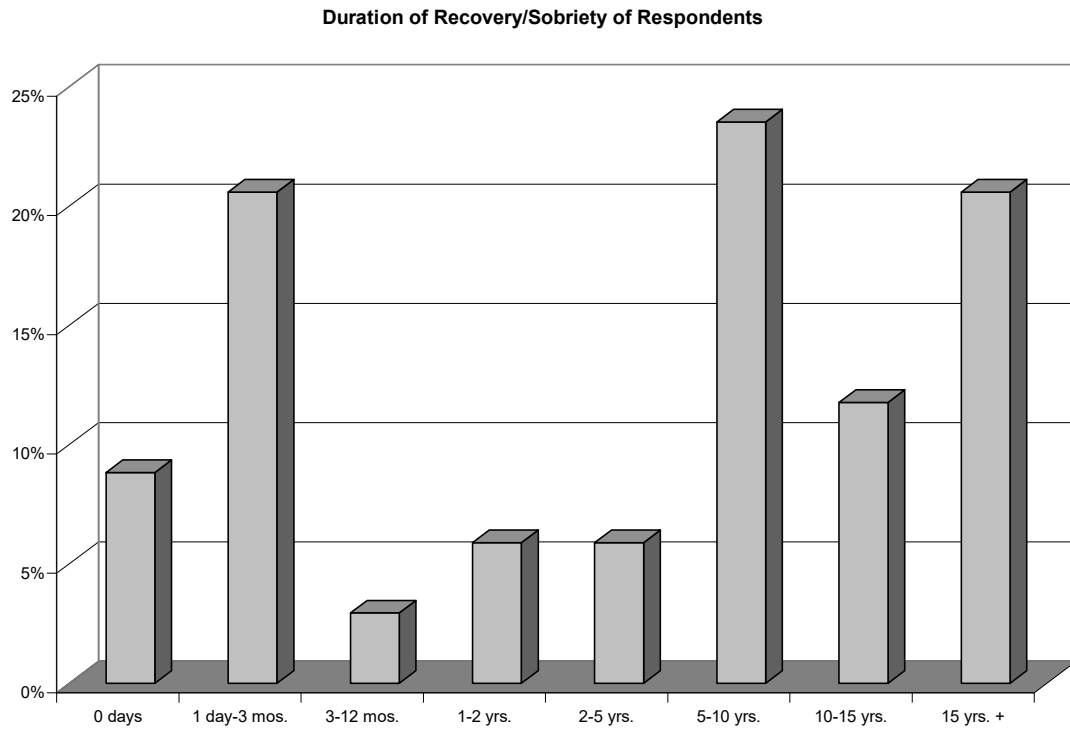


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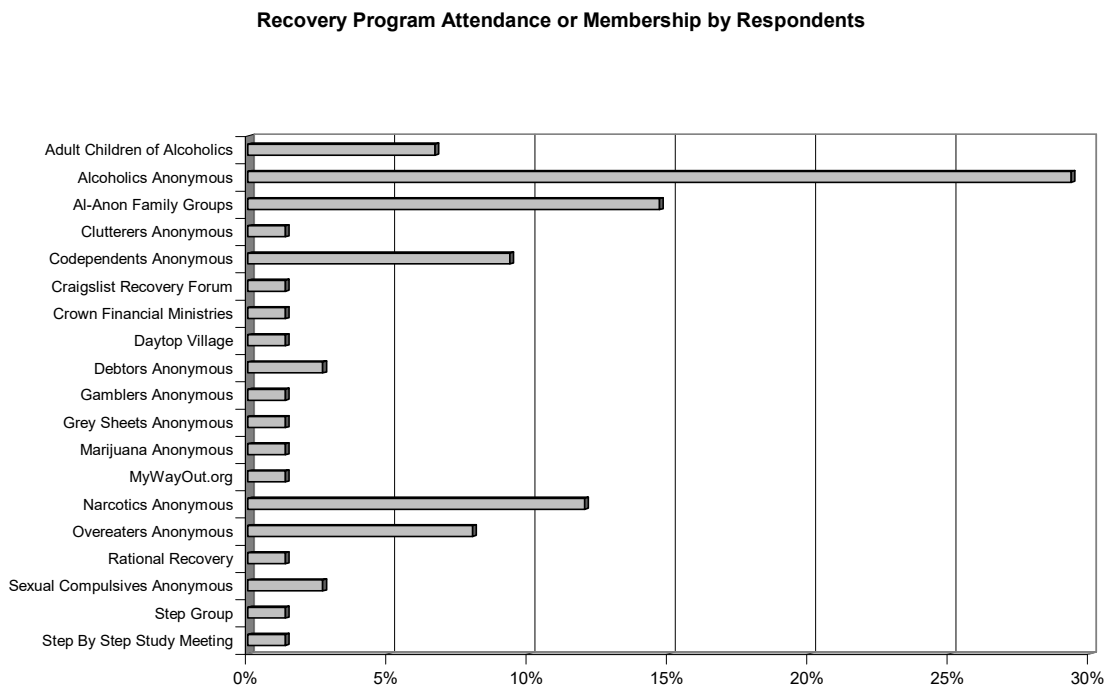


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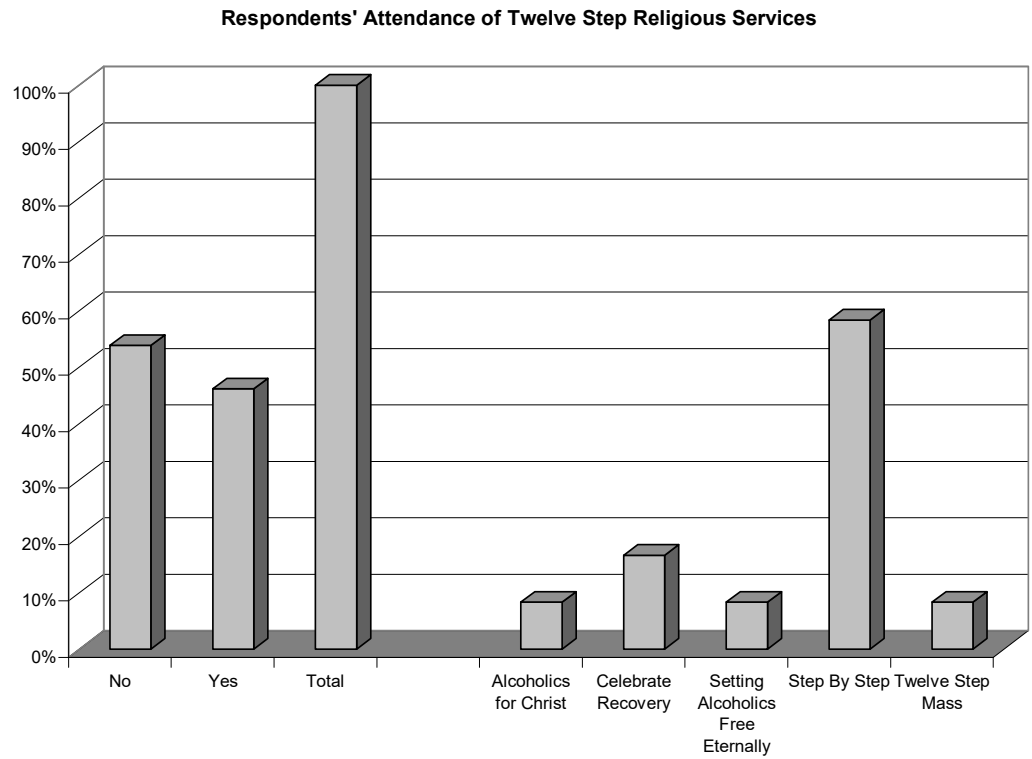


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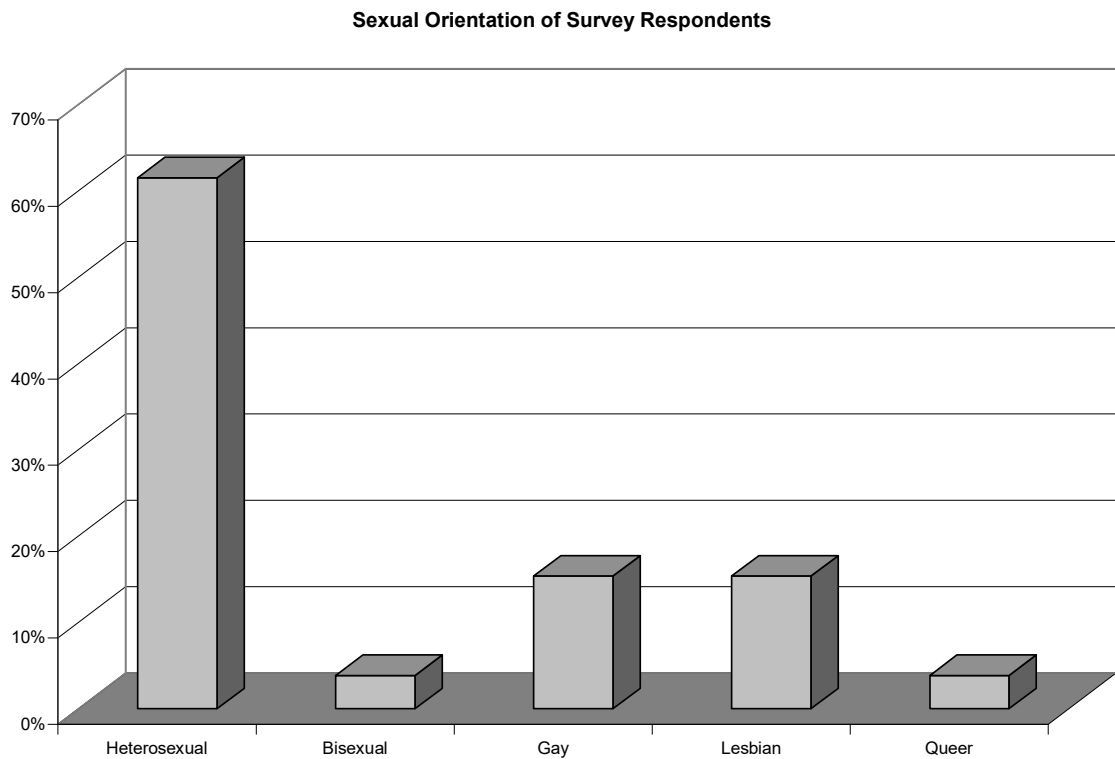


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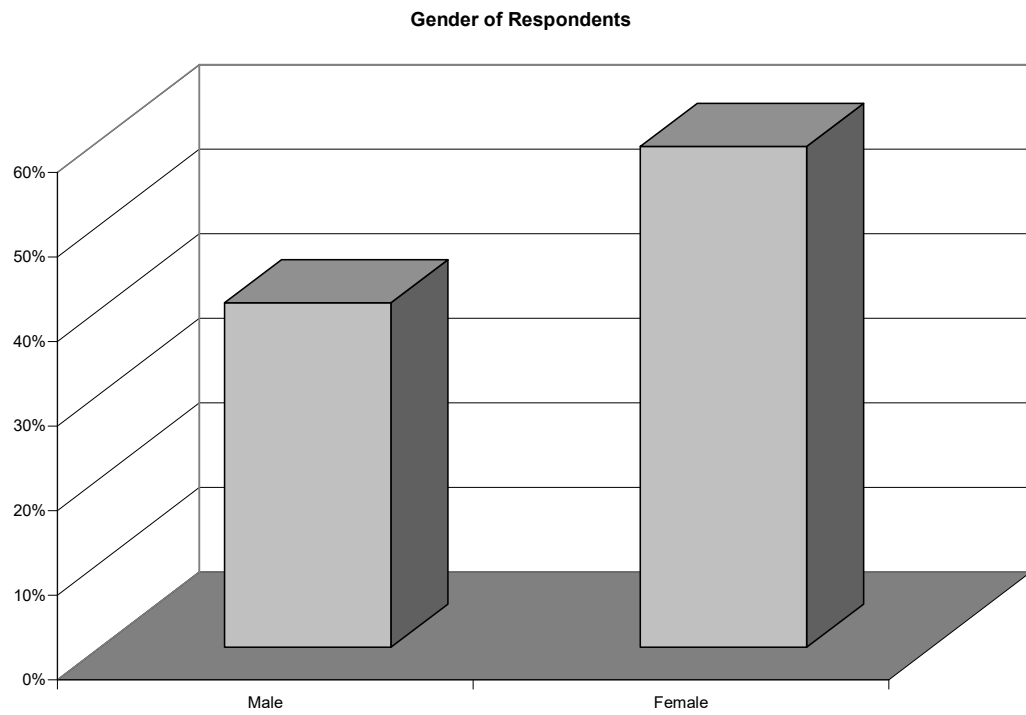


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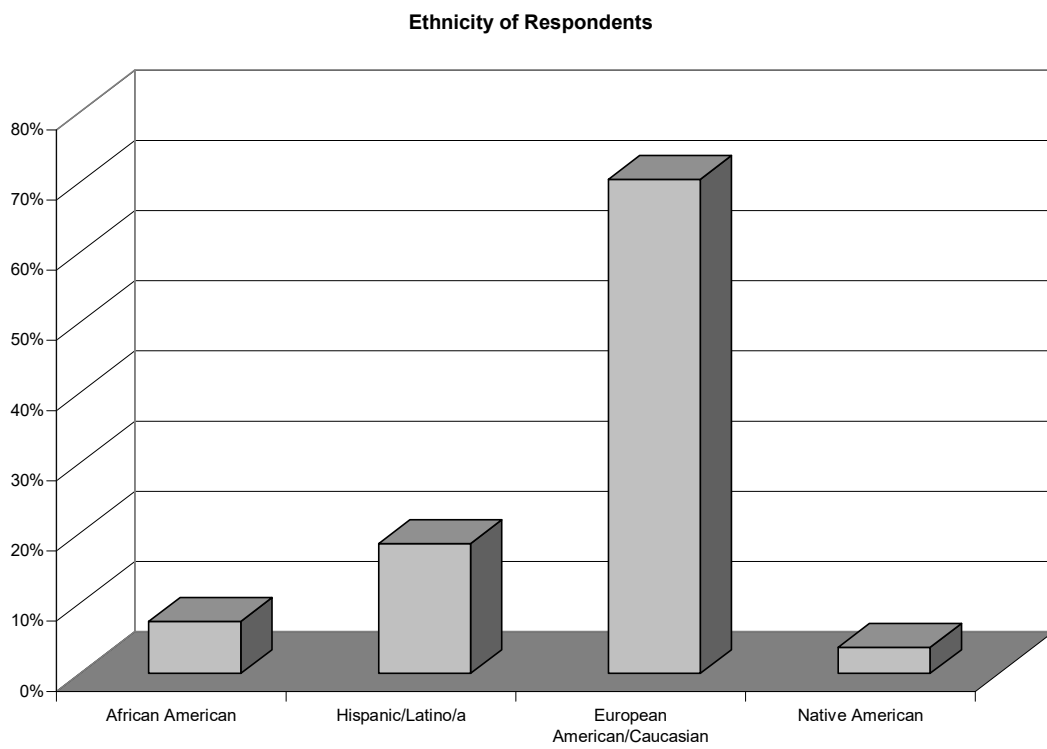


Figure 8



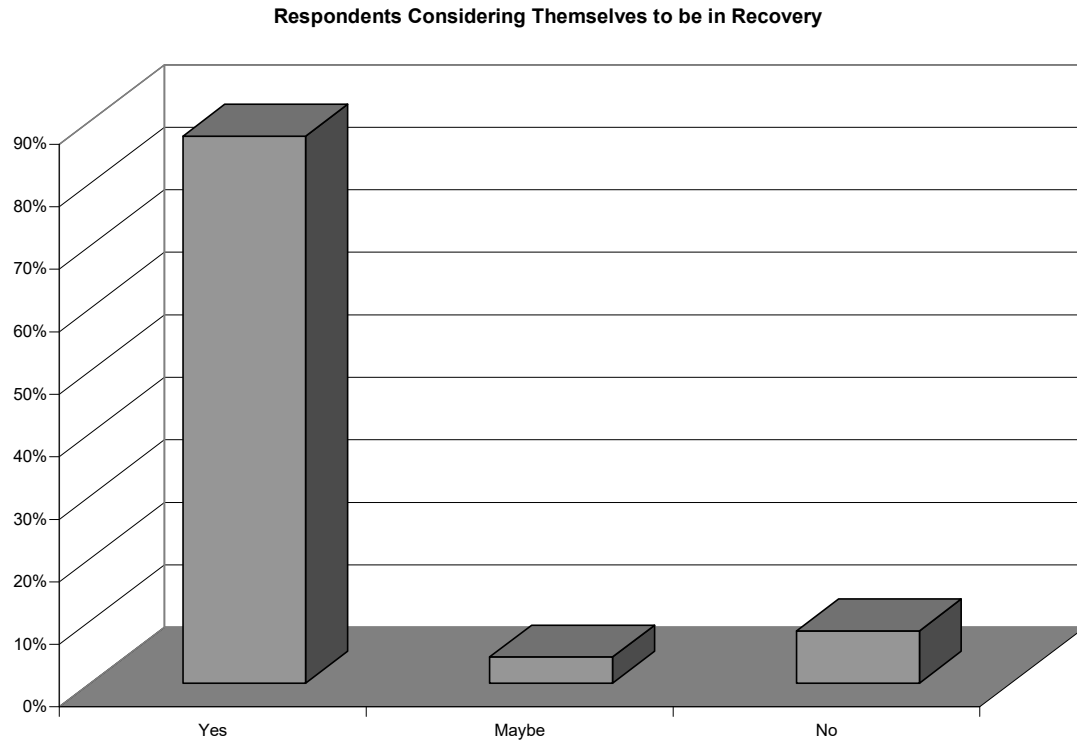


Figure 9

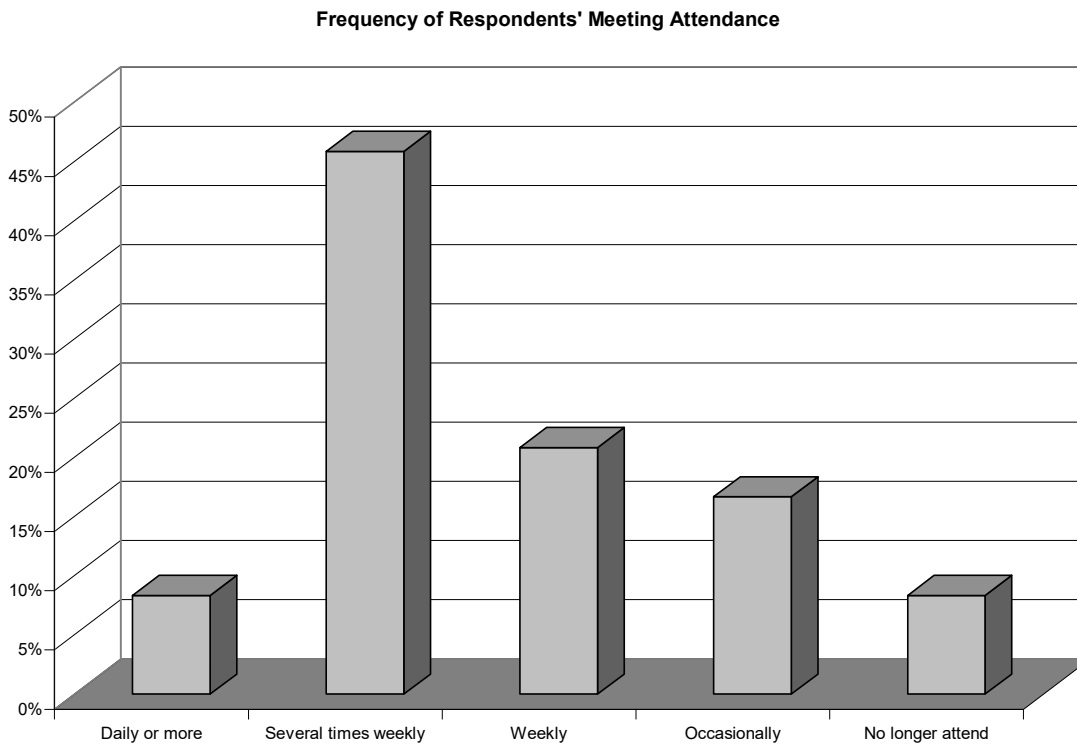


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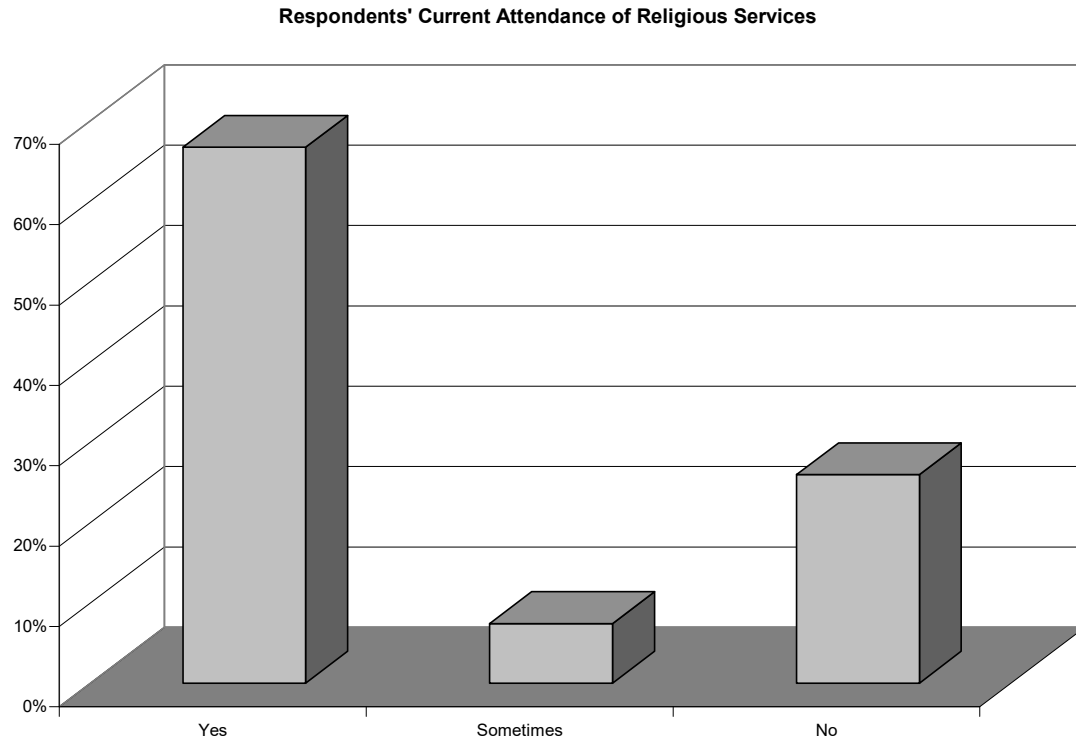


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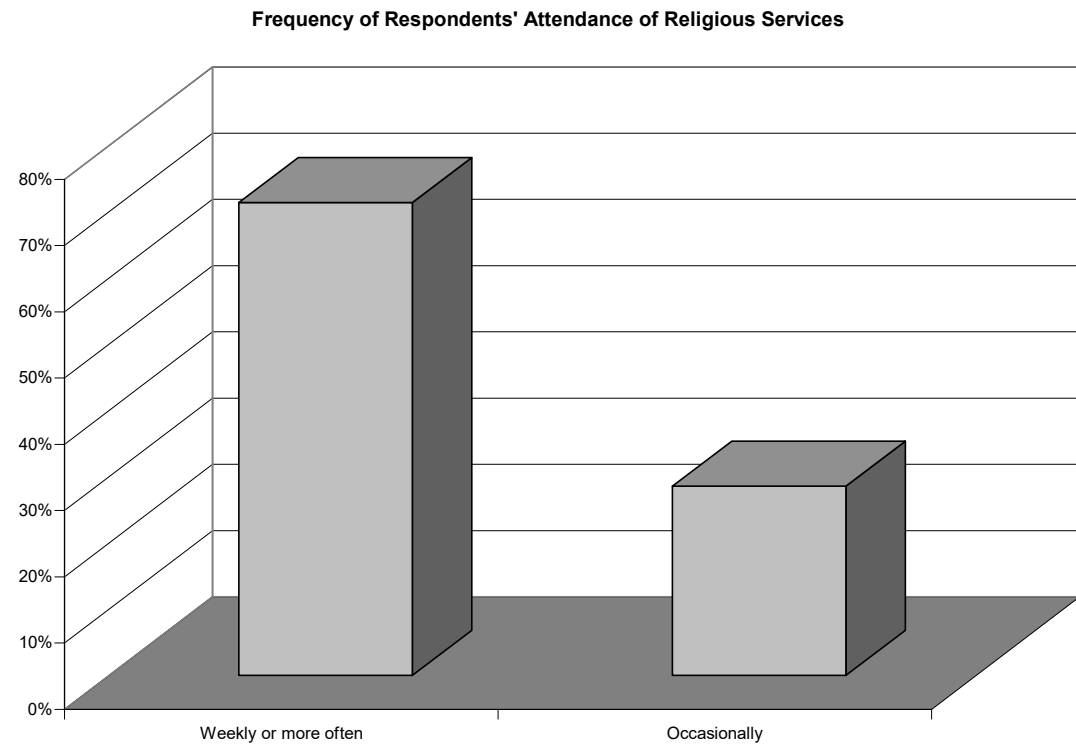
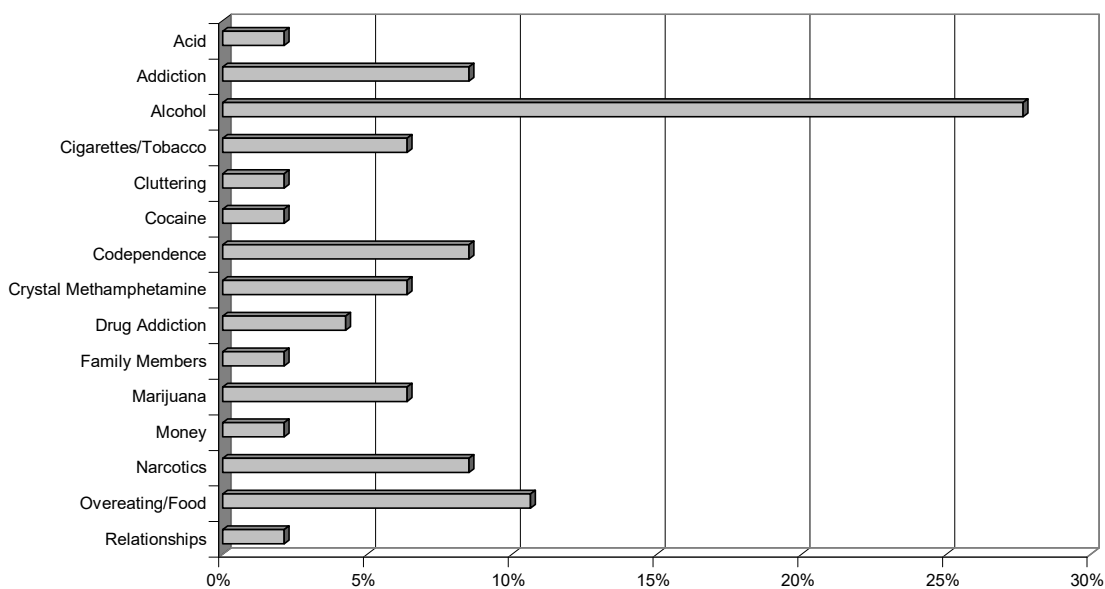


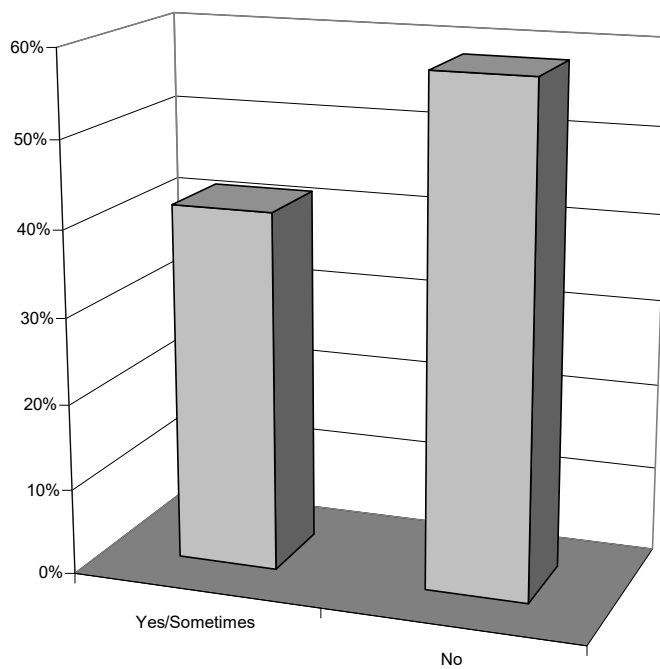
Figure 12

**Respondents Self-Reported to be in Recovery from the Following**



**Figure 13**

**Respondents' Current Attendance of Twelve Step Religious Services**



**Figure 14**

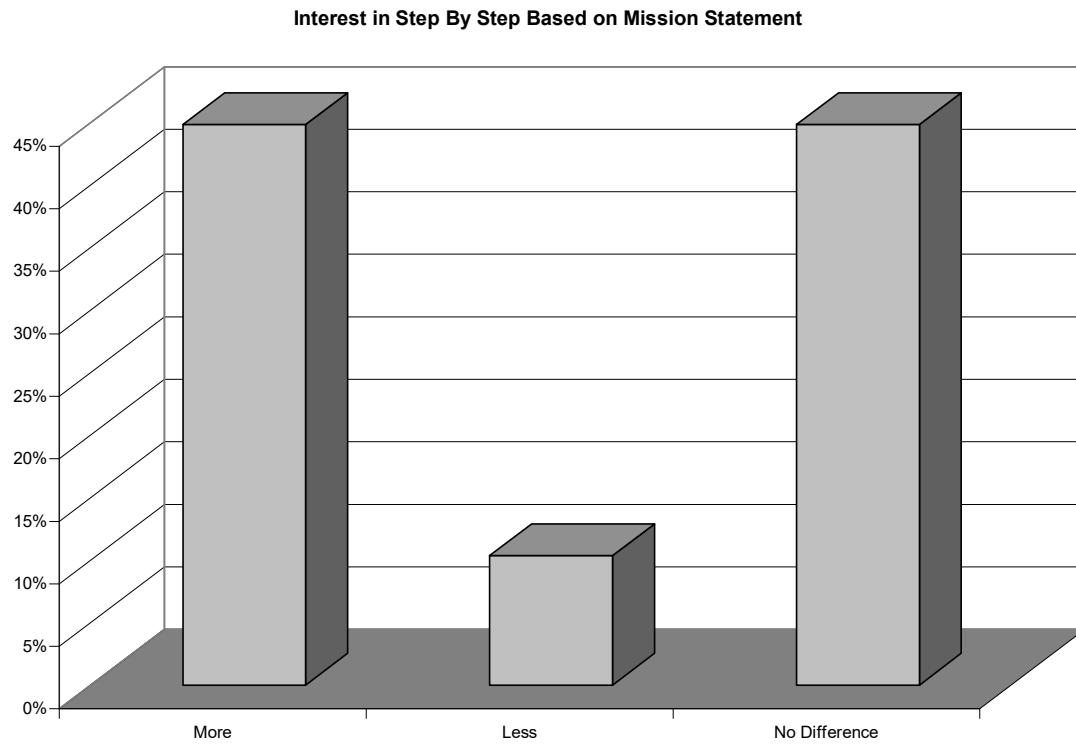


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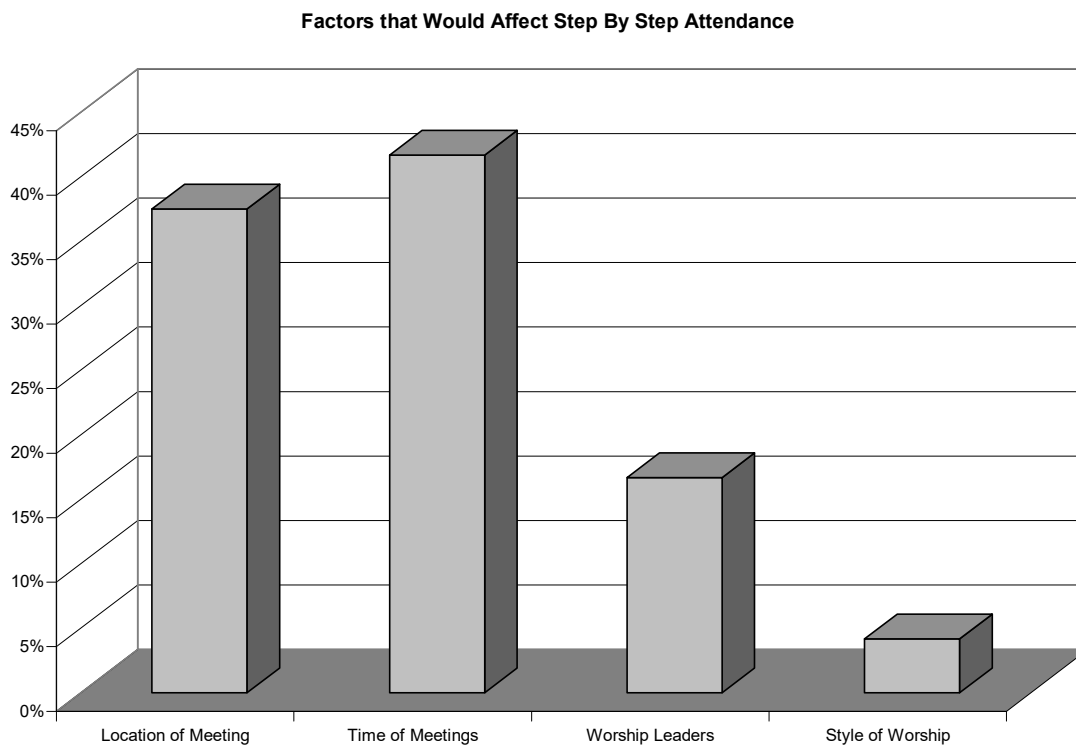
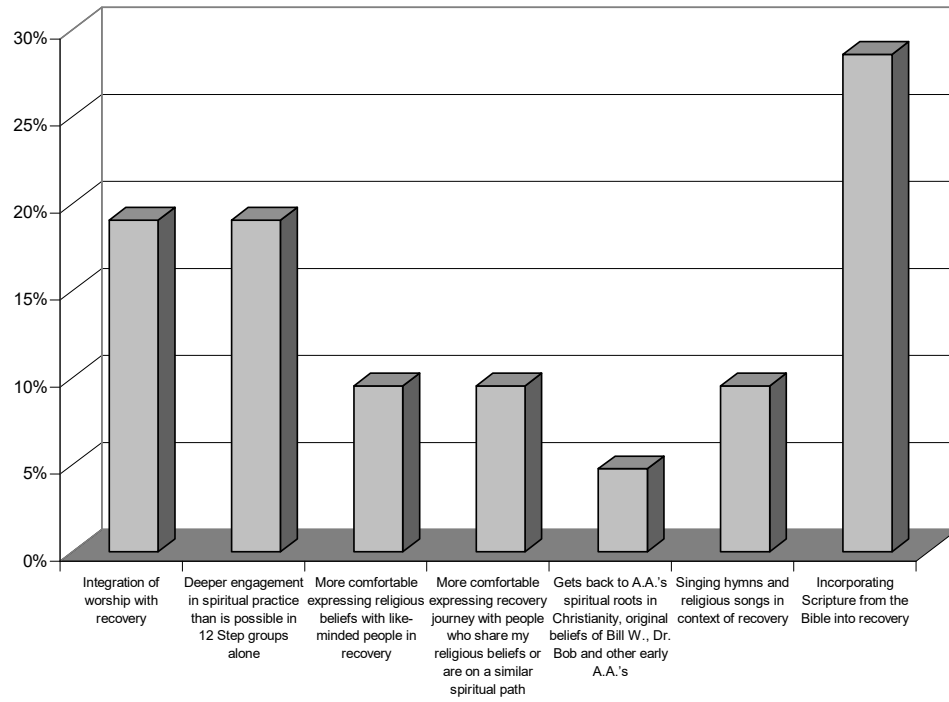


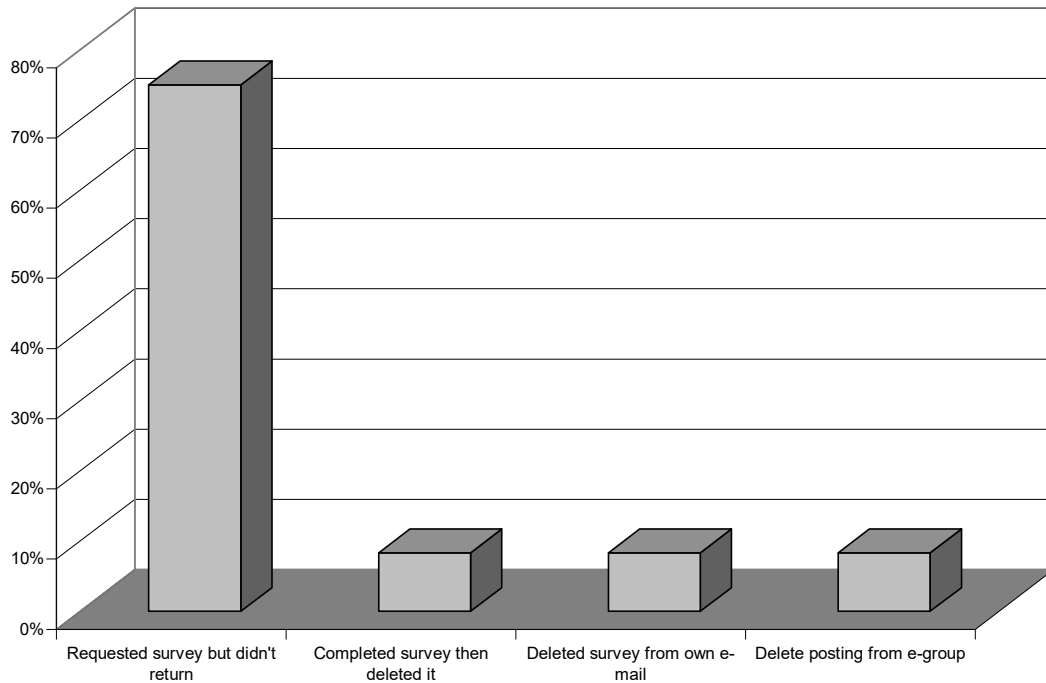
Figure 16

**What Keeps Attendees Coming Back to Step By Step**



**Figure 17**

**Non Respondents to Survey--Self Reported Actions**



**Figure 18**

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